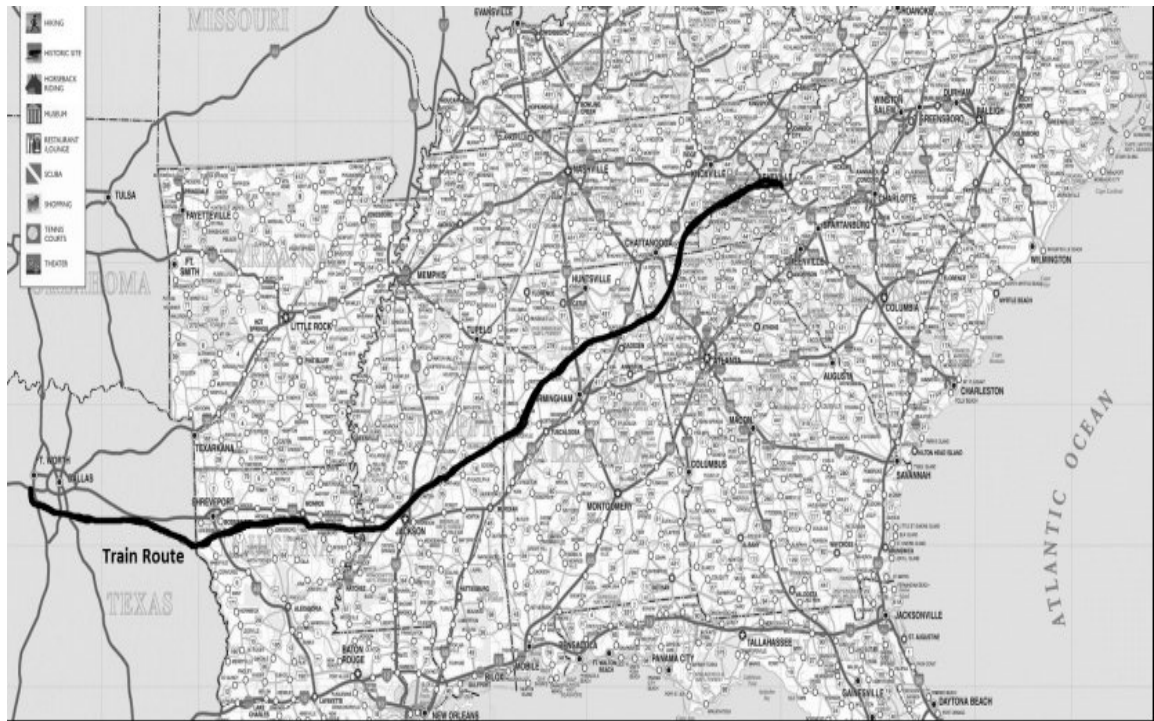


SURVIVAL TRAIN

STEVE FLOWERS







CHAPTER 1

It was a typical Sunday morning, much like that of December 1941 when the world changed forever, people going about their daily task, at this hour most were still sleeping like those at Pearl Harbor on that fateful day. This day would also change the lives of the world, perhaps forever. The rumor of war had been brewing for months but it appeared things had settled down and life was returning to its normal pace.

Everyone was gathering at Steve and Kathy's house. The preparation for the camping trip was about to pay off. For the next ten days the group had made a loose plan of times and locations to visit. In typical fashion, Wes and Blanca were on time

and helping Steve with last minute details of the trip. This was also a way of keeping his mind off how late Kathy was running. Mark and Marci turned the corner followed by Alan and Karen. Jeff and Tami were standing in their front yard across the street. This left only Mike and Maria to complete the assembly. As Steve was yelling in the door to check on Kathy, His son Mike was turning on to the street and everyone was gathering to get underway. Kathy yelled out she would be only one more minute. Steve looking at Wes and grinned," that's good twenty minutes ago it was down to two minutes". Wes grinned back and said" it is 5:30 we all move slowly at this hour". "I know but if I don't pick at her about something, she will think something is wrong with me." As the collection formed up Kathy came out with coffee and sweet rolls. "Now that is worth the wait, wasn't it" she smiled devilishly. With everyone reaching for a cup Steve, Kathy and Mike's pagers went off at the same time. Each look at them and then at each other with a horrified stare, "This is the real deal isn't it," Mike said." My God, it is "Steve shouted and looked toward Kathy "it is, it is. Listen to me there is not a second to waste", Steve said in an excited but controlled voice. "We must take shelter and expect the very worst that can happen, right now." As he turned to get things moving, he noticed Kathy had already started the truck and was preparing to go. They had made a plan years ago, discussed it and had decided who was going to do what if it happened. She was in action without a word." To the high school now as fast as we can go" Steve shouted "and don't stop for anything at all". Everyone was confused but followed .The school was less than a mile away, so with little traffic on the road at this hour, it took no time to get into the parking lot behind the cafeteria. Steve leaped out of the truck and pulled a pair of bolt cutters, sledgehammer and cable from the box behind the cab. Kathy was directing everyone to gather food, blankets, flashlights, medical kits any and all emergency equipment they could carry." Do it fast as you can, and I mean fast". The door opened and Kathy was leading the way to the food storage locker, with the hammer Steve used to break the lock. As

everyone rushed in Steve returned to their trailer for equipment. People were still pouring through the door mostly in an orderly manner but still in confusion about why they were breaking into a school and what could warrant such excitement by such otherwise calm people. As Steve ran to the door with two heavy loaded duffel bags under each arm he heard the words "hold it right there mister" turning around it was a police officer. One of Midfield's finest. "Drop it and put your hands where I can see them". Steve turned to face him, and as he started to explain the first airburst hit. Both turned to see it. "You have got to follow me now or we will be dead in seconds" The officer look back and shook his head. "I mean now," Steve shouted. With out a word the officer ran forward grabbed a bag heading inside. Everyone was in and Mike was at the door looking for his dad. "It has started and we just made it. Once inside Mike was trying to explain to everyone what was taking place and how they knew. "My brother Dan is in military decoding and classified intel." He went on to further state that he had spoken with the family about war brewing at various locations in the world. "I want each of you to have a pager and keep it with you at all times. If 911 followed by my birthday shows up as a page rush to cover, be prepared for the worst. It will be a major bloodbath with few survivors". The plan had been made with the family after dinner one night. Maria worked as a part time teacher for the high school and had noticed that the cafeteria and storage room were part of the lower section in the split-level building. This could serve as a fallout shelter and provide food and water supplies as well. This became the meeting point for everyone and all details ironed out.

As the collection of would be campers plus a police officer who happened to be in the area, settled down Mike explained the rest of the details. "It was pure luck or fate if you will that it happened at this moment." Meanwhile the ground began to shake and loud thunderous booms followed in rapid succession. Overhead the sound of the building collapsing in sections and items fell from the shelving. Blanca looked at Wes

and said" I am glad we didn't cancel the trip like we started to." As she looked around the room, she could see fear and despair on the faces of others. "Who knows when this will end and if we will still make it "Marci said to no one special. The police officer began to speak. "My name is Paul Goodson; I assume that all of you know each other". Tami replied, "We have been friends for years, Steve and Jeff are brothers, and the rest of us are childhood friends or long time co-workers". "I just happened to be patrolling the area and saw the RV's in the parking lot" Paul went on to say. "But the strangest thing was people running into a school at 5:30 in the morning carrying armloads of things. If you were running out I would think it was a robbery, running in was a real surprise I guess stopping to investigate saved my life". "I guess so," said Alan.

The rumbling grew stronger and more frequent by the minute. After what seemed like days to those inside it was complete silence. Steve looked at his watch it was now 10:19." Well he said I guess that is the end of round one". The power had gone off after the first initial burst and someone had lit a small battery lamp. As silence fell outside those in the safety of the storage began to wonder what life on the outside was like. "How long will we need to stay inside someone ask in the dimness of the room." Mike replied "According to Dan at least a week, but we should stay as long as the food last". "Well let's get organized to the best of our ability" chimed in Karen. Each person set about moving blankets, lights and equipment into places to make an inventory of what was available." I wish we had a radio to at least know what was going on," Blanca whispered." It wouldn't work now" Mike said "after an exchange like the one we just heard all towers, stations and everything to broadcast a signal of any kind would be down for days. Besides there was probably some nuclear stuff involved as well, so the EMP will be a factor as well." Mike had been a communications specialist in the Navy and now worked for a local telecom company. Steve and Kathy were very proud of their son in the direction of life he had chosen. Often they had discussed

about how with the pressure on young people today it was so easy to go wrong. At 23 years of age, he was on the track for success. Ryan had talked with his cousin Mike about the Navy and had planned to enlist when he graduated this summer. However, it looked like everyone's plans had changed as of this morning. Steve and Mark had worked together on the railroad for most of their adult life and were talking last week about how much longer it would be until retirement.

Kathy made a list of medical equipment while Karen and Tami compiled all of the sleeping bags and blankets." If we stand still long, enough they are going to put us in a stack of some type "Jeff remarked. Alan piled tools near the door, while Wes assembled cooking equipment near the food supply. No one was giving directions but it seemed like a well-rehearsed plan. Paul stood by the door not sure what to do. Finally he said" I know I am the stranger of the group what should I do". "Just jump in wherever you can" replied Mark. It took about 30 minutes for the process, and everyone found a spot to wait it out. Some of the parents held their children although the youngest was Amber at age sixteen she still held to Karen's arm looking at mom in wonder. It was Kathy who spoke up "okay everybody we can't help what has happened out there, but we can make our time in here go by better if we make social gathering out of this". Steve looked at Jeff and said," There she goes the eternal planner." Several decks of cards found among the camping gear so a marathon of spades started. Followed by several game of charades and then capped off by everyone tell their most embarrassing moment. Kathy kept things moving and it was working. Nobody was crying or showing any outward strain over what had to be the worst day of anyone's life. Karen pulled Paul into the middle of the room and said "okay you are on deck tell us about you. Don't leave out the good stuff like funniest person you have arrested and stuff like that". Paul seem to warm up and started to fit in with the zany happenings. Time passed and no one was keeping track. Eventually the suggestion was made to eat and after the inventory list was provided, it looked like

we would eat like kings for a while. With the passing of time, the room began to smell of body odor and stale air. Alan, a building contractor had rigged up a section for use as a restroom. It provided visual privacy but sound and smell was a different story, however it was the best that limited materials could offer.

So for the next two weeks time passed and each endured in their on way. Tempers never flared but cabin fever and grumpiness took its toll. Finally, the decision made to check on the outside world. "I think two or three of us should go out at night and scout around" Wes suggested. "By moving at night in a small radius of the camp, we could monitor blast effects plus check for roving bands of thugs. I feel sure if anyone is out there, there is no law and only bands of people not sure what to do". Mark added. Steve stepped forward and said" I think I would like to be first to help check things out." He looked toward Kathy and she nodded OK. Paul was next" I will go, in a way this is my duty." Wes was next, "I will be the third".

With preparations made the digging at the door started. When the main part of the building collapsed, it formed a lean-to over the door with a small tunnel providing access to the open end of the building. A hazy daylight appeared. The air although fresher than the stale air of the room had the smell of smoke, cordite, rotten flesh and death in general. It appeared to be noon, so the team waited to leave under the cover of darkness. However a few brave soles ventured into the building to observe as much of the outside world as could be seen from the safety of the shadows. As darkness fell, the trio prepared to leave and do a quick search. The recognition code practiced to prevent any mistakes upon their return. Three men slipped into the night. As they moved away from the building about a hundred yards, the trio stopped for a moment to look and listen. Paul said in a light whisper" it is amazing how dark this area is without any streetlights or any lights of any kind. I have patrolled this area for three years. Most of the landmarks are gone, I am not sure if I would recognize the

school." "That's true" Wes whispered back "we better use a compass to find our way around in our own town.

A large portion of it burned or collapsed in piles of rubble. The town did not appear to have taken a direct hit of explosives but suffered more from fire and shockwaves. "Let's move to the police station first, we can arm ourselves from the gun vault just in case," said Paul. "Good thinking, I feel very naked out here with only my 9mm," Steve stated. "Kathy has the shotgun back at the shelter". Wes nodded in agreement Blanca has my 30-30 and all I am packing is a .357 with a half of a box of ammo. Paul grinned, "The guys of the force always kidded me because I carried four extra magazines instead of two like everyone else". "Glad you have the extras, but I hope we don't need them". Steve replied. As they moved forward under the cover of darkness, the sounds and smells were un-nerving. Just the distant sound of a crackling fire was heard, not a single sound that most people take for granite in everyday life. No noise from the highway as trucks hurried to deliver their freight, honking of horns by frustrated drivers. "It is so dark and quiet I feel like we are in a coal mine," Wes said. Paul moved the team forward toward the police station. It took about an hour to reach the remains of the building. The front had been large glass windows to let in the sunlight and provide an open view of the main street. The main body of the construction formed a wall that divided the police station from the fire department. The small town like so many others utilized one building for many purposes. While the right side served as police and fire, the center was for light and water department and the left section contained all of the administration offices. As with many plans on paper, this seemed like a win- win idea. However with all of the police cars and vans plus the fire department equipment stored outside not to mention the poles, meters and cable belonging to light and water. In addition, admin cars and personal vehicles the place resembled a giant flea market.

Stumbling and bumbling through the darkened wreckage of the building Paul led them to the storage room for the police equipment. "This is for the SWAT team so it has a lot of good equipment," he whispered. The room was still intact except for the ceiling collapsed and a mound of papers about four feet high. "It figures," he said with a bit of sarcasm, "the world, as we know it can come to an end but paperwork is forever". The door to the vault opened, Paul turned on a small flashlight, because of the intense darkness, and it appeared to be a searchlight. "Let's pull out what we need now but stack up other equipment for our return," he said. "This entire place could cave in at any time". Steve and Wes carried out two CAR-15 rifles along with two shotguns. Paul was retrieving ammo along with extra magazines." What do you want to carry now?" asks Steve. Paul responded with "give me the MP5 and another Glock like the one I have now". When the supplies were stored for later pick up it totaled to be six MP-5's, five riot shotguns, four CAR-15's and two gas guns plus about two thousand rounds of ammo. "I hope we don't run into any trouble but I feel better being well armed" Steve said. Wes took a compass reading of the supply stash.

Paul spoke as they paused for a breather, after leaving the site of the police station. "I guess I won't see any of my brother officers again. They were like real family to me". "Do you have any family in the area?" Wes asks. "No" Paul replied, "I am from San Marcus. I moved here for the job. So I have few friends outside of the department." Steve added, "We have all lost so many friends and family, it is going to be very hard in the weeks to come." Paul spoke next "I guess we had better move in to Arlington to see how bad things are there." As they moved silently through the night, the trip seemed to take an eternity to cover the shortest distance. It was about six miles to Arlington, just a short hop by car. Nevertheless, walking in total darkness and over mounds of rubble a half-mile hike was like two miles of solid walking. The amount of smoke plus air borne particles of who knows what filled the night sky, blocking the moon and stars of any light. Several times, they wandered off the highway. At last, at

the outskirts of town, Paul asked, "Do you have a reference point?" "Yep," Wes replied, "I make us to be near the intersection of South Cooper and Sublet road. So fire station nine is just a few blocks ahead do you want to stop in there for a short rest". Steve interjected "only if the place is empty, after a few weeks the bodies are going to be ripe with decay" Closer investigation revealed an empty building." I guess engine and ladder nine were out on a call when the shit hit the fan" Steve remarked. Inside the brown stucco station, the men stopped for a short break.

As they discussed their plans, everyone agreed on Steve's comment after a few weeks some of the buildings would not be fit health wise or safe to enter. Wes who was a firefighter/paramedic at Irving was looking around the station as much as the limited light would allow. In a few moments, he returned with two coils of rescue rope and a few figures eights plus additional equipment. "I was thinking," he said as he placed the gear by the bay door. "What buildings would be the least occupied at the time of day when everything came down". Paul stated it was 0530 on a Sunday. "Most stores would be closed except the one like the 24hr *Kroger* at Green Oaks Rd". Steve interjected that the most beneficial place would be the *Parks Mall*." Think of it, just a few security guards maybe some stock clerks but all in all empty. The stores should have most of the supplies we would need. It also offers a great field of view from there." With the mall sitting at South Cooper and I-20 plus the property was on a hill that placed it at a vantage point. On a clear day from the top floor food court, you could see the outline of the high-rise buildings of Ft. Worth and on the other side with a little strain; you could see the outline of Dallas. They decided the mall would be the first stop. Leaving the fire station moving across the parking lot at *Home Depot* the group of three moved slowly. "It would be good to be indoors before sunrise," Paul said. "Yes"-agreed Steve, "I would feel like a sitting duck in the daylight." Wes spoke up "I wonder how many groups of people are doing the same thing looking for supplies and other people. The mall would be a likely focal point." The trio entered the

Sears tire shop on the south side of the mall. Moving upward to the main level they paused for a few moments to listen for sounds that might warn them of any one else inside. The smell was that of stale air from inside mixed with the smell of smoke from the outside. Nevertheless, there was the true smell of death and decomposition as well. Paul suggested that they move toward the center of the building to be in better position at first light. Trying to move in silence was a task not easily accomplished. The terrazzo floors covered in broken glass and walking in boots caused a constant crunching noise that seemed to carry the length of the building. Each person took up a position where they could watch one another in addition to the long corridors as well. As daylight appeared, it was evident that the sun would still not be at its full Texas fury. A large amount of pollutants in the air was still providing a dirty shade. After about an hour it was determined that, they were alone. In one respect, the silence was unnerving. Speaking aloud for the first time as they walked along each one revealed things that had been praying on their mind. What would the death toll be, who won the war, was the whole world involved, what had finally caused someone to push the button? The questions came forward to no one special and none of them could answer. However, the big one was who is left besides us. Sleeping in shifts on mattresses liberated from *Macy's* the team kept on the alert for any signs of life. Steve brought a stockroom cart from the sporting goods store filled with camping food, binoculars and other items to keep things going. "I wish we could get word to the others" Steve commented as he change places with Paul on watch." Well they aren't expecting us back until midnight tomorrow. It is going to be hard to describe what we have seen."

At six o'clock, the next day the group decided to head back to the shelter. Wes suggested taking a truck from the *GMC* dealership and drive rather than walking. "We haven't seen a sign of life and driving will allow us to carry food and provisions. They searched the office for keys and when located, the true search began. "Doesn't

anyone drive a stick shift anymore" Steve exclaimed? At last, Paul found a large one ton with a stick in it. Pushing it off to start was no easy chore. Moving down South Cooper with Paul driving the group stopped at the grocery store. Inside the smell was strong with decaying meat and produce. The men set about loading bottles of water, powdered milk, canned meat and vegetables. Next stop was the weapon stash and on to the shelter. After giving the proper signal and receiving the all clear, they moved into the parking lot of the school. All rushed out to meet them. Kathy hugged Steve until he thought he pop. "I have never worried so much about you" she yelped. Blanca and Wes were off to one side as she had him in a bear hug. Everyone began asking question at once. What did you find out, who is left, how did it look? The meal considered a feast after the Sparta rations served over the last few days. The trio gave all of the details including what they considered health risk due to the large number of dead. It is not only the humans but also all of the livestock to be taken under advisement Steve reported. "We must make a plan to leave for an area that is safe and can be settled without fear of contamination or band of marauders," remarked Mark. Although no one on guard, duty at the shelter had seen any signs of life. Everyone felt pockets of people could still be around. "Trust Me," Alan said, "when winter comes and food gets short due to spoilage or lack of locating it. People will be killing each other for a can of beans". Nodding in agreement, Mike spoke up, "are we still going to implement the plan we made with Dan". Kathy answered, "We should discuss it and find the best possible route to take". The cafeteria was the site of the meal, and the conversation fell silent. Marci questioned" it appears your family knew of the possibility of this and have worked out some details on this. Let's hear what you have to offer". Well Kathy stated" we all sat down when Dan was home on leave and talked about what we should do if it ever came about. Steve grew up in the mountains of North Carolina, and is very familiar with the area. As a child, his family would take him on vacation to the *Biltmore House*. Therefore, we all decided we would use that

as a meeting place in case we were separated". A blank look crossed over many of the faces in the room. Please go on, someone asks. "Well I think Steve should take it from here," Kathy said. All eyes turned to Steve. He began to talk, the group gathered closer for details. "*The Biltmore House* is a huge estate that is located just outside of Asheville, N.C. it was built by George Vanderbilt. This is a true engineering marvel. Most importantly, it sits far back from any main roads, if all directional signs to it were removed, it would be hard to find. Secondly, it is built with solid stone construction and would be likely to take any type of punishment and still survive. The heavily forested area surrounding it would supply fuel for heating and lumber for building if needed as well as game for hunting. All though I wonder if there will be any game left after the destruction we witnessed on our trip to Arlington." Can it support a group such as ours someone asks? "Absolutely it has two hundred and fifty rooms that I know of maybe more, in addition to an indoor pool for water storage during the winter". We have taken several vacations there", Kathy piped in "it is a beautiful place as well as capable of meeting all of our needs. I am in favor of it". Jeff spoke up "we did spend a lot of time around the area growing up and I think Steve is right. It never crossed my mind but now that I think of it, there is no place better for a new start." Tami nodded in agreement. OK queried Alan "then how do we get from here to there". That is a question we need to decide now". Everyone began brainstorming as Angela and Amber poured more coffee for the group. Coffee was one of those things taken for granite, but when the supplies were unloaded, a mighty cheer went up as the first can was dug out." What are our options?" Karen asks. "First we could walk but that would take to long and we could fall into bad company or become injured along the way." Right another voice piped in," it could take months even if everything went our way. By the winter, preparation had better be underway or we will all freeze to death" Well another voice interjected driving is possible but there are a lot of hazards in it. First thousands of vehicles will block the road, secondly bridges could have been

destroyed and lets don't forget roving bands of thugs. There could be a thousand and one hazards in driving" Marci quipped; "well we can't fly or go by ship so what is left." At that exact moment, Steve and Mark's eyes locked on each other. "You thinking what I'm thinking." "Yep, it could work. We will take the train," Mark said. All eyes were upon him. What! Came the reply from more than one person. "I tell you I think it will work, don't you," he said looking at Steve. "Yes, I think it will." He nodded in agreement." Well" Jeff responded, "lets here your thoughts on it". Mark started, "first we can pick up a locomotive and a few cars in the Ft. Worth yard. Next with me at the controls and Steve throwing switches, manually it would be a better trip than on the highway". Steve spoke up, "the lines are less likely to be congested than road ways because of the spacing of train is regulated by dispatchers. Fuel is stored at yards and round houses. Each time we enter one we can fuel up". Wes asks "but if you have to open track switches along the way won't that make traveling slow". "No" replied Steve "the track maintainer and signal crews have truck that can ride on either roads or rails depending on which set of wheels they have engaged. With someone ridding with me to drive I can stay a mile or two ahead so Mark won't have to stop. In addition, the truck will make less noise than the consist so it allows me to scout ahead for trouble." "Do we dare try it?" ask Karen. "I think it is our best option," replied Tami. "Are there any other questions" Mark posed. No one responded. "Well let's get some rest and talk about it later" Mike and Maria had remained quite during the discussion. However, as the group separated they waited until Steve and Kathy were alone. "Do you think", Mike asks" we can pull this off," he said looking at his dad. "Yes, son I think it can work better than any other choice we have. I can tell you after seeing Arlington we had better move before we all die from the plague or who knows what".

Paul came and sat next to Steve. He said, "what about the surprise we still have for them". "Great Scott! I completely forgot about that! Hey Wes! How about the gift we brought back for the group". "Oh! Yeah, it looks like just the right time". The

three men went to the supply truck and came in with four CO2 fire extinguishers. "What is this all about" Tami asks? Wes grinned "a little treat from the scouting party". As he was, speaking Steve and Paul entered with two cases of beer and a box full of white wine. A few burst from the CO2 and the drinks became chilled to perfection. Cheers sounded as cocktails were served. The evening settled in, and groups split up into small details with task for the pending trip. Steve, Mark, Jeff and Wes were working out details on how to locate an engine consist plus cars. Jeff and Wes had no knowledge of trains but wanted to help with transportation part. Jeff was a Chaplin at the area hospital and Wes was a firefighter in Irvin. Each would help the operation by working with and learning from the railroad men. Paul came and took a seat with them. He spoke frankly and wanted their advice. If it is possible for you to move a train and a truck across the country, then could they teach him how to get one of the service trucks on the rails to go to San Marcus? "We can teach you how to operate the wheels and get on and off the track when you need too" said Mark "but learning which track is the right track to take is a problem we are going to have. You don't have an exit signs". Steve offered, "If you wind up on the wrong spur line, you could go hundreds of miles out of your way". Nevertheless, Paul felt he needed to try to see if his family was alive or dead in south Texas. "All right then" said Mark "we will show you what we can to help you get under way".

The next morning all of the work details gathered in the cafeteria and put together their plans. Paul announced his plan to travel to San Marcus. "I know it sounds crazy" he said "but I can't rest until I know for sure that I did everything I could for my family. Besides you, all have each other and I have no one". Most of the people understood but all were sad at his decision. The first order of business was to get the group to Arlington and began to collect supplies. Wes, Mike and Alan left in the pickup to bring back transportation. Steve and Paul explained the types of weapons brought back from the police department. People fired off a few rounds to become accustom to

them. It seemed to Steve who had been hunting from about age ten, that sound was much louder than normal. When he mention this to Jeff who had grown up hunting with Steve all of his life as well, Jeff remarked that maybe we have become accustom to the silence of the world the last few weeks.

CHAPTER 2

The transportation crew arrived with trucks and vans to haul everyone to the *Parks Mall*. After the work task were separated last night and the comments made by

Paul, Steve and Wes about the smell of the decomposing bodies plus the meat and produce in the grocery store. The mall once again selected as a point of supply and shelter. The group moved toward the next step in their mission of survival. As the vehicles move out, everyone except the trio that had ventured out saw the horror for the first time. On many occasions, people closed their eyes when passing a church or school they were familiar with. Tami

who had been a principal at the elementary school in town was thankful she could not see it from the road. Mike had commented at how strange it was that some things were unrecognizable while other areas were not as destroyed. The short trip to the store now took a lifetime. Inside the mall, the group appeared to have rehearsed each action. Kathy, Blanca and Karen went to *Macys'* and began to stack clothing on a stock cart from the back room. No fashions show here these were functional clothes. Jeans, shirts socks, coats and everything that would be needed went on the carts. Kathy went to the back and returned with shipping boxes to be filled. Do not worry about the size someone can wear it in the group was the battle cry. Each cart filled and pushed into the open area. On the opposite end of the mall, Alan and Wes were giving the tool section of *Sears* a good working over. Being on the lower level, the boxes pushed outside into the parking lot. Mike had stopped in at the electronics store as was loading up on scanners, two ways and any electronic equipment he deemed necessary to help establish commutation with the outside world as well as helping keep the group in touch. Boxes of gear pushed into the waiting corridor. Tami, Maria, and Marci were working over the bedding section for blankets, quilts any thing considered useful went into the box. No percale sheets here mom Angela laughed as she tossed in an armload of blankets. Tami called her daughter over and said, "While we do this I have a task for you and Amber." "OK mom just name it." "Why don't the two of you take a box and load it with DVD's I am sure they will have power on the

train and it will help pass the time. Plus, if you find any video games, you might want to add those as well. But Angela pick out happy or funny movies we need to laugh for a while.” The two girls went off as if they had no worries in the world. It struck Tami odd how well her daughter was handling things. Here she went on a shopping trip in a mall with a 9mm strapped to hip and her best friend with a shoulder bag packing a pistol with extra ammo plus granola bars. Ryan passed his sister one the way to help Mike “don’t be picking up any boys Ange” he teased. Steve, Mark, Jeff and Paul were headed to Ft. Worth to locate an engine consist and cars for the journey. They were concerned about making the trip in broad daylight but it had to be done. For one reason as they drove the truck down the tracks service road Steve was explaining to Jeff and Paul about how to line a switch. “This can be done by a dispatcher a hundred miles away or by manual override. First, we need to open the lock then pull the pin on the back of the switch and now the hard part. Pull it over until the tracks line up. Be sure it goes all the way or you will derail the train. Because I work for the railroad, I have a switch key to fit these locks. As we move out of our area it, will take a hammer and pry bar to break them open? This is a slow go for you when you are in a truck by yourself.” As they, neared Ft. Worth nerves began to tighten. The questions in the back of the mind surfaced. Are we alone, if we make contact will they be friend or foe? Crossing into the yard, they stopped to make a plan. Should we search the station and offices or just go forward and look for the equipment we need? Mark suggested that Steve search for system maps, timetables and other information needed to plot their course, while he took the other men two and searched for the needed equipment in the main yard. As Steve plundered through the dispatchers supervisor office as well as the signal maintainers office for system route maps he felt he was being watched. At last, he exited the building with several large boxes of documents. "I think this will get us under way," he reported to Mark, as the two of them looked over the yard trying to decide how to do the engine make up for the trip. Paul came up and said, “I think I

found the type of trucks you were talking about." Steve went with him to see what he had discovered. Mark meantime was showing Jeff how to start a locomotive. "It is really simple" he said, "First you pull this primer handle to fill this glass bowl full of fuel." As he instructed Jeff, the loud whine of a small motor filled the air." Next, he said flip this switch and pull the handle here." The big diesel began a slow whomp whomp as it turned over in attempt to fire. Giant clouds of black unburnt diesel filled the air. In a few seconds, which seemed like an eternity when you are standing near, it fired to life. Paul turned to see what all of the noise was about but Steve guided his attention back to the truck he had located. It was a track maintainer truck. Used by crews to repair the signals along the route. First Steve said, "Pull this truck over by that dock at the far building, and then come back and do the same with this one." He left Paul and went to check on the progress made by the other two. Mark had Jeff starting the second locomotive alone, he told him try it and call if you need help, Steve and Mark talked standing on the ground in front of the running number one.

"Even though we could probably make this trip with one unit, we should take three."

"Why three"

"Well I was thinking we will need one car for all of the people, another for supplies, we should put a flat or gon out front of the first unit to serve as protection in event of attack or junk on the track.

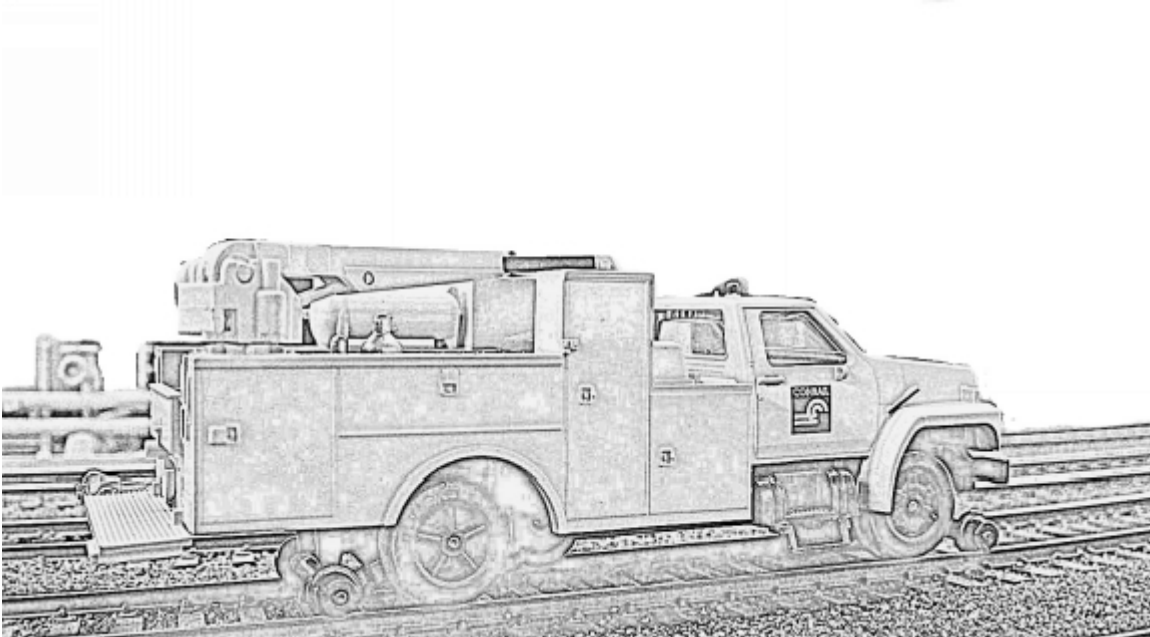
"OK I'm with you there."

"If something happens to one of the front units, we will have the third in reserve".

"Good call, I'm with you on that. Besides who knows what we will pick up between here and there".

"Right again",

Mark went back to Jeff who now had the second unit running." Good job" he said, "now lets check those M U cables to be sure they are hooked up right. The large cable between units is designed so that when the engineer makes a change in the front unit all other engines hooked up will comply with the change." Mark was explaining to Jeff "it bad for business when the front engine is trying to do



thirty

and the rest are trying to do fifty" he laughed. With the three units now running and hooked together the consist was built; now we needed rail cars. Paul had moved the trucks to the dock and Steve was helping him unload all of the equipment to make room for the supplies they would need. "Keep these items handy," he advised Paul pointing to bolt cutters, pry bars and heavy hammers. "All of the electronic stuff can go from these compartments. I will be back in a few minuets to check on your progress". As Steve started across the yard, he stopped and stared. It was the answer to a prayer. Off to one side was a cut of cars belonging to an *Amtrak* passenger train. Steve sprinted to tell Mark of the great find." Well we will ride in style now" Mark cracked, as they went to look them over. The cut of cars was three standard passengers with a mail car to the rear. "Let's take two of the passenger plus the mail

car,” Steve suggested. “You were reading my mind” Mark replied. Jeff who was becoming quite the yardman lined the switches as Mark made the connection. “We will pull these three out drop the last one and then back in to pick up the mail car.” Mark instructed Jeff. In a matter of moments, the setup was made. Now Mark said, “We need a few boxes with a flat on the rear”. The switches lined and the train began to take shape. Steve had located a flat loaded with crossties. This will make a good buffer for the front of the train. “Let’s fuel them and get out of here,” declared Mark. Paul had emptied each of the trucks of all but the most needed equipment. Now it was time to learn the next step. Jeff went with Steve to see how to put a truck on rails. He had each of them pull a truck on to a crossing with the trucks facing down the track. Now he instructed, “Pull on each of these hydraulic levers and be sure the wheels line up with the rails.” The wheels came down and the trucks were raised off the crossing and completely supported by the rail wheels. “It will be very strange to drive these at first” Steve warned “because you will want to steer them and you can’t. The rails have complete control over that, but you must monitor your speed. Keep your hands off the wheel, but your eye on the speedometer.” As the three of them were talking, Jeff noticed a movement in the shadows. Without any signs of acknowledgement, he spoke to the remaining two. “We are being watched,” he warned. Deciding to confront whoever it was and hope that if trouble broke out Mark could flank them to provide relief until they could take cover. All three turned at once. “Come out and show yourself now” Paul commanded in true police officer tone. A woman stepped forward she was terrified to the bone and it was obvious to everyone that she meant no harm. Jeff lowered his weapon and stepped forward. The other men keeping her covered. As they walked toward each other, he could tell she was shaking so badly that walking was a chore. She was Hispanic and in her forties by his guess. “Please don’t hurt me,” she was pleading repeatedly.

“Are you alone?” Jeff asks

"Yes, yes she cried all alone."

"We are not going to hurt you" Jeff reassured her. The men took her to the truck and offered her food and water. She gladly accepted both. Then they began calm but information gathering question session. She had been cleaning in the main office and depot when every thing happened. A section of the building fell in trapping her in the basement. She pointed to the collapsed section-saying "see over there" It took her four days to dig herself out, living only on food she could find in employees desk and vending machines. "You know how people bring food to work to snack on during the day. Well I went through every desk I could find. So, I lived on crackers, nuts and soup plus things I could get from the machines. When I got free, there was food to be found all over the city, no people. They either had fled or were killed. I stayed nearby hoping someone would come. I was about to give up when I heard the big train start up. So, I came out to see what was going on. At first, I thought you were looters or bandits because of the way you were going from the buildings to the train cars. But, when I saw you working, I knew you were not looting. All of the guns scared me but I to have a gun, so I said to myself everyone has a gun now." She was talking very rapidly now as though it was relief or fear maybe both. Jeff reassured her that no harm was going to come to her. He also told her of the others in the group, including women and children. He also invited her to come along. When she felt relaxed a bit she said, "I did lie to you about one thing. My daughter is hiding in the building over there she has been watching to see if any harm would come to me". "Ask her to come out" Steve requested, "She must be hungry also". Olga stood and shouted its "OK Raquel they are friendly, it's OK" Raquel stepped out from the shadows holding a small pistol in her left hand. As she approached, her beauty was apparent. Not a day over twenty-five thought Steve, Paul was trying not to stare but he could not take his eyes from her. "Here have something to eat," he offered as she walked into the group. Mark was still watching from his concealment, it is not that I don't trust people, he was fond of

saying but I still like to cut the cards. Olga now returned to the offer poised by Jeff. "Where are you going?" she asks? "The main body of the group is headed east, but Paul is traveling to San Marcus in hopes of locating family members." Olga's eyes brightened, "we would like to travel to Laredo to see about our family as well. Could we travel south with you" she pleaded. "Of course, he exclaimed! It would be great to have someone along to help with the maps and food. Plus the company is certainly welcome." A slight grin formed on Steve and Jeff's faces. "Well let's get things going," Steve suggested. Turning their attention back to the trucks, Steve was talking with Paul about reading the railroad maps. "Watch the tracks closely and keep track of the mile markers. These are the only things you have to be sure, of where you are. Another thing is there are no exit signs like driving on a highway. The dispatchers route the trains for us. We no longer have that luxury. As you approach a yard, it will have a sign giving you the name of the location. Match it to your rail map to see where you are. The yards are great place to refuel the truck, you can also check any cars for supplies you may need. It is slow moving through the yard because of the number of switches you have to line. The main lines will bypass, but you should go in for resupply. Track yourself on the road map also sometimes the yards are on the outside of a town and you can drive right by it and never see it. By taking up the wheels you can by pass stalled trains and re-enter the tracks below." Paul questioned Steve about the stalled trains. "All trains are equipped with a dead man switch. If the engineer doesn't make an adjustment on the consol or tap the switch every ninety seconds the train will go into automatic shut down and stop on the track. This prevents something happening in the cab resulting in a runaway train. When you come upon a stalled one you will have to go around even if it means backing up a long way. We will route you out of the yard and send you down the I-35 corridor. This will let you pass near Burleson and Alvarado. By the time, you reach Hillsborough you will need to stop and check equipment." Paul said they would stop at a store along the way and fill the back

plus any compartments with food water and camping supplies. "I am glad you have someone to travel with" Jeff remarked." I feel relived myself" Paul replied. "Do you want us to mark our route to North Carolina.?" Steve asks" just in case you want to join up later."

"Sure, no telling what we will find along the way. It is possible that we will need to turn back. So if finding you is an option. Having you, mark the route would be a great help."

"Well then, here is how we will do it "Steve went over details of painting a yellow stripe on the rails after the switch was line so that if Paul followed he would know by the paint if he was on the right track.

"We can't paint each switch we line or it would slow us up to much. But we will mark the main ones. Anytime you see, a yard sign look on the back of it. I will write the date we went by using a black marker. This will help you keep track of our progress. Also, I will tape any signal or route maps on the back of the sign in a plastic bag to help you know where you are. Be sure and keep your road map handy. Any thing else we can do for you."

"No" Paul replied. "Thanks for all that you have done I can never repay you." "Just come back a soon as you can and bring whoever you can find." Jeff said. As Paul, Olga and Raquel drove off in the two-ton truck. Steve turned to Jeff and said." I wonder if we will see them again".

"I hope so."

Moving across the yard the three men prepared for their next part of the journey. Steve started out in the truck with Mark and Jeff following in what had to be the strangest train in railroad history. Jeff stood behind Mark watching each movement and listing to each explanation offered. Mark was telling how it is important to start slowly to pull out he slack in each car. "If you tear off the line like a drag race, you can break a knuckle on one of the cars. Trust me there is no better way to piss off a

conductor that to break one. Because they have to replace them and it is a heavy and aggravating job.”

“When is the last time you broke one?”

“About three years ago outside Sweetwater, it was in the winter and at night. Your brother didn’t talk to me for the rest the trip.” Mark laughed. “When you get up to speed by going from one notch to another, is important to watch your air pressure. On the train, air is life. You can use engine brake or dynamic brake but it is important to keep the air brake constant. The airlines we were talking about during the coupling of the cars provide braking power to each one. We will talk about that later. Just watch these controls now.” Mark said pointing to the console.

Having line the switches as they traveled to Ft. Worth the trip back to Arlington was uneventful. As the train pulled into the intersection of South Cooper and Division St., crossing Steve could see trucks parked along the way. “Well it looks like they have been working hard to compile all of this,” Steve said to himself. Wes emerged from a building a waved to them followed by the rest of the group. Kathy looked at Steve and said, “I know you work for the railroad and I am an accountant but even to me that is one strange looking train.”

“I know Kat, but it is all for a purpose.”

“Looks like we’re just in time to eat,” spouted Mark as he climbed down from the lead engine followed by Jeff.” You didn’t let Marci do any of the cooking did you?” Marci picked up a rock and threw it at him. “Just for that buster I will throw your part away.”

After a good meal cooked on a gas grill liberated from *Sears*, plans were made for the next step. Alan and Wes proposed an idea that they had been working on.

“Do you think we could load supplies from warehouses in town on to the train? It would be easier than trying to carry stuff from the local grocery stores and stacking

them by hand. There would also be large quantity at one location rather than going to a dozen places.”

Sound good to me someone offered up.

“I don’t see why not” Steve added, “Most warehouses have rail sidings we could load by forklift in place of hand.”

Mike found a phonebook and started looking in the yellow pages. “I still think we should leave this place as soon as we can for health reasons,” offered Maria. “We should,” agreed Tami.” How long would it take to do this” ask Karen? “At least a full day” was the input by Wes. “Well we should seize the stuff while we can get it, because who knows what we will find later on the trip”, commented Kathy. After much discussion, the decision to spend one day loading and then get out of town. Using the trusty *Mapsco*, the team plotted locations found by Mike in the phonebook. The supplies taken from the mall were placed into the passenger cars. Always the organizer Kathy directed the front car for traveling while the second for sleeping and eating. “We can modify the seats in the second car to meet these needs”. “I have a plan,” said Alan. Turning to Mike and Wes “he said let’s go to *Home Depot* and do some shopping.” The three of them tore off as if a posse was chasing them. The truck sped down the street. “Who knows” said Karen “after all these years of marriage I still don’t know what he is thinking half the time.”

Tami was asking Jeff about Paul. “Did he get off all right and how did he appear about leaving and not knowing what he might find. Well, in all the excitement here plus the great meal I guess we forgot to tell everyone about our discovery in Ft. Worth.”

He went on to tell the full story as Steve and Mark helped themselves to another piece of pie. Looking across the street at the police station, they nodded to each other and started walking. Karen may not know what Alan was thinking but after

fifteen years of ridding the rails together, they knew each other's thoughts. "SWAT van" mumbled Steve.

"Yep", came the reply.

The van blown onto one side but they entered the rear doors. More weapons and ammo for the train, Mark found two hard-sided gun cases. Sniper rifles could come in handy plus assault rifles and tear gas guns. In addition, they found smoke and gas grenades plus several vest. "Looks like a good haul to me." Steve said.

The three shoppers returned with a flatbed truck loaded to the brim with everything you could think of. First, the air compressor went into action, as seats were unbolted and tossed out the doors of the second car. During a break in the action, Wes came out to explain. "If the seats are removed, you could put regular household furniture inside for a better ride. Beds and tables bolted to the floor in the second car and couches and tables in the front car."

"That's my man," said Karen shaking her head. "He has just watched too many episodes of home makeover shows for his own good."

Just down Division St. was a furniture store. As the demo crew completed their mission, Jeff pulled the train down a few blocks to acquire the goods for a new type of railroad travel. Just a predicted the cars took on a life of their own. Mike had liberated several workstations to mount all of the radio gear. This could be heard by anyone in the front car. Although scanning for signals, it remained quiet. Kathy's organizing plan had come into shape with the aid of bolts and L brackets the gas grills formed a kitchen in the second car. Camping refrigerators and plastic storage tubs completed the ensemble. Beds bolted in the back and covered with sleeping bags. The bulk of the mall supplies were loaded into the mail car to be used as needed. Mike had worked up a power supply to provide for a TV and DVD player to work in the front car. "Tomorrow we load supplies and leave."

CHAPTER 3

Jeff was driving the train as Mark watched. "Trust me; he said after driving while we work a local, the road will be a piece of cake."

"Local?"

"A local is where you switch cars at business. Picking up full ones and dropping off empties or the other way around depending on if they are manufacturing or distribution. No one likes this job because of the constant lining of switches and making or breaking connection on the cars for the conductor, the engineer hates it because of the constant backing and pulling. The real crazy part is that crossings are everywhere. So you always have to keep an eye out for some asshole not paying attention to his driving. Most of the crews that work this are new guys with low seniority that can't get a road job."

Jeff was beginning to understand as he watched Wes line what must have been the sixth switch in the last thirty minutes. At the food warehouse, they pulled out several cars to clear access to the doors they wanted. Adding several empties to their growing train the group began to fill cars with supplies. Inside the teams had broken up, several of the women had scouted the warehouse locating needed items. While everyone was driving forklifts, carrying loads to the cars. At the rail cars, Mike and

Alan were switching loaded forklifts brought in by everyone with empties so they could load the cars in a secure manner. No, need it having it all fall over and breaking in route. Steve had located an empty Refrigerator car, the plan was to load it with soft dinks, and beer plus a little wine would be nice. The temperature would need to set to chill but not freeze. Produce and meats were spoiled so only drinks would need to be chilled. Thinking to himself Steve considered the change in diets because of the lack of meat. With the exception of canned or cured, meat would be in short supply. "I am really going to miss my steaks and beer with the Sunday game." Then he paused and thought, I am going to miss the game also. Karen called everyone together and brought forth another question. "We will need other supplies in the future as well, such as hygiene products and medicines."

"Well let's find and load them quick" Steve remarked. "Because we really need to get out of here before this place becomes more of a health risk that it already is. What if we get enough to get by now and stop in a small town later for the full load?"

"OK" said Mark "then let's build this train and go before it gets to dark to travel."

"Give us about two miles of a start" Steve told Mark. Kisses exchanged as Kathy and Blanca warned their men to be careful. Wes told Jeff "we will be on channel four on railroad radio and one on the walkie-talkies" Mike had given them. Mike had arranged a radio system where all radio traffic between the truck and the passengers as well as the crews could monitor train. In addition, he had established two different types of radios. The first was the standard railroad model and the second was radios taken from the police department. "Always have a backup that is the Navy way he joked."

Maps were unfolded as the plan to bypass Dallas established. "It is just going to be mass destruction and rail blockage everywhere in there," Steve told Wes. "And don't forget about the smell" Wes added. As they pulled away, Wes was driving and riding guard with Steve preparing to line switches. Steve carried a 9mm on his side

and a CAR-15 slung over his back. However, with the bending and pulling required lining switches neither were very accessible. They move at about thirty miles an hour down the track with Wes still trying to get use to working the gas but not being able to steer.

Following the system map, the plan was to move east and turn back north as they cleared the major cities. About two hours into the trip, they came upon a stalled train. "Well" Wes asks, "How do you pass a train." "You get in the passing lane" Steve smarted back. "Here is the plan he followed up. By keeping up with the mile markers, I know that a mile back we went from double tracks to single track. The key is to move the cars in small groups of two or three down to the double. First, let's call Mark so he will know what we are doing and not enter into the single-track lane." After a short radio chat, Jeff had put the train into the siding and was holding fast. Mark had walked ahead to be sure; the switch lined for the cars to pass on the main line.

In the time, they had made arrangements on their end the truck was removed from the rails. Steve was showing Wes how to bleed air and pull pins on the cars." Just pull the rod sticking out along the center of the car and the air will release next pull the handle at the coupling and the knuckle will release the car. Gravity should take over from there. If not we can use the truck to tap it, but that is very risky." The first car rolled away with ease

"How fast will it be going when it reaches our train?" Wes questioned.

"It depends on the grade of the track at a guess I would say about twenty or twenty-five. Mark will let us know about the first one."

They waited for a report before turning any others loose. At last the radio came to life "one by at about twenty". "Copy that next ones leaving now" Steve responded. Looking at Wes, he said, "We can send them in groups of three." The task of bleeding air and pulling pins reminded Steve of when he first started on the railroad working in the hump yard. Speaking between the cars as they walked he said, "I did this for ten

hours a day for the first three years of my career. It is not so bad when the weather is good, but a lousy place to be in the rain.”

The train was broken down bit by bit until all that was left was the engine consist. “I dread this” Steve shrugged “because we both know in the front compartment will be the rotting remains of the engine crew and it is going to be a mess to deal with. What choices do we have” Wes posed. “Well when the air lets off it may roll on its own or Mark could break loose the front engine and come up here to pull it back to the siding. Let’s hope it goes on its own.” As they pulled the last cut of cars loose from the rear of the consist Steve moved forward to the cabs. As the air released the giant, locomotives began to moan. I am going to send them one at a time because of their weight plus the speed it will be traveling when it goes by the siding. The MU cables disconnected and first pin pulled number 9376 was rolling on its own. “Good job I hope the other two follow suit.” They did and the track finally cleared for things to get moving again. Back in the truck, they waited until Mark gave them the all clear. Progressing down the track gave them a chance to talk. Until the miles had rattled by and the yard sign of Midvale came up, advise them where we are Steve requested.” Unit 1 to unit 2 we are at 157.3 N on the map. Stopping to investigate, will advise” By being vague about their location and using railroad mile markers with yard letters this kept anyone who might be scanning like Mike was from knowing their location.

The train would slow down and stop a mile short of the yard until it was cleared to enter. Scoping the yard from a small hill, it appeared to be clear. The plan was to refuel the truck and engines plus check for any maps or keys that would be needed. As Mark pulled to the pumps at the roundhouse Wes was looking over the yard one more time as the sound of the train would certainly bring anyone within earshot. Steve meanwhile was checking the office out. Everyone exited the cars for a stretch of their legs; Ryan climbed down from the front and asks his dad if he could look through the

cars in the yard for anything he might want. "Don't get to far away," Jeff cautioned 'in case we need to leave in a hurry." Wandering about with his rifle slung over his shoulder he reported that he had found a boxcar full of computers. "Just think of that", he exclaimed! "A whole boxcar of them". He also had found several tank cars of diesel fuel. "How do you know it is diesel ask his dad?" "Well Uncle Steve gave me this yellow book he said it came from the DOT. It has all of the number codes in it for the diamonds on the cars. See how it works," he pulled it from his jeans pocket and began to explain to his father. Jeff told him to tell Mark or Steve about it in case they wanted to take them along for extra supply because they may not find it when supplies ran low. Mark was delighted and gave Ryan a lesson on lining switches so they could add it to the rear of the train.

Small groups were moving about the yard looking for things and getting rid of the cabin fever of ridding so long. "Where should we stop for the night?" Steve asks as several of them gathered around the office front. "Let's find another place out in the boonies like last night," Alan suggested. "We are less likely to have someone sneak up on us than if we are surrounded by buildings." It was agreed to move on for another few hours but to stop before it got to dark to establish a security perimeter. The group trudged on for another three hours before coming to a long open stretch that provided a view in all directions. "The ladies out did themselves tonight" stated Wes. "It is amazing how well they function cooking with gas grills and one microwave oven with power supplied from a generator." "I agree," said Alan "I am so full I could pop!" As they rested that night little did they know what the next day would bring?

CHAPTER 4

“Well the nights sleep didn’t make you any better looking” Wes smarted as they got into the truck to start another day.

“Take a good look in the mirror yourself and try not to break it”

As they were checking out the truck, Blanca and Kathy came forward each carrying a small cooler. “We brought some road food for you,” Kathy said. “Thanks baby, we do get a little hungry out there.” Placing the coolers in the backseat on top of the two gun cases that held the Barret 50cal and the 30.06 SWAT rifle the girls remarked how cluttered the truck was. “It looks like a bunch of pigs has moved in here,” Kathy moaned. “Well no time for the maid to come in” Steve quipped. As the girls moved toward the train, the truck began the daily route of checking track and reading maps. The track seemed open and they were covering distance at a rate greater than thought possible. The next town listed on the System map was Lindsey. Across check on the road atlas gave the town size at about 8,000. “Could be another sleepy southern town,” Wes said as he closed the cover and tossed it on to the seat. “Well it would be nice if someone was home,” Steve suggested. At the one-mile approach signs, Wes slowed to a stop behind a large silver signal service box on the side of the track. “I will take a look and you cover me,” Steve said as he climbed out of the cab pulling his CAR-15 with him.

“I will be in the trees on the right” Wes replied.

Moving down the track Steve removed the binoculars from their case and lit a small cigar. As he approached the town, he could hear the sound of equipment in operation. Someone may be home after all he thought. The track ran right through the center of town. Like so many old towns, the railroad was the lifeblood of it at first. The old steam trains would stop to take on wood and water. As the towns developed, main streets ran parallel and formed the nucleus of growth. Many times the depot was

perched on a small knoll to aid the stationmaster to maintain a good line of sight in each direction of the track.

Moving at an easy pace Steve kept the bank of the track shielding him as much as possible. With the cover of trees ending and the town opening into view. Both men paused to the activities below. Groups of people were moving about loading debris into dump trucks and other containers located in the main street. Placing his rifle on the ground behind the bank and trying to appear non-threatening Steve stepped into plan view. Several people spotted him, drew side arms, and shouted for him to stop in his tracks. This command was obeyed at once. Moving forward out of the group was a tall blond man about early forties. He stepped with caution toward Steve. At a distance of about thirty feet, he paused and spoke. "Can I help you with something" the reply came in a non-threatening tone. "Sure just tell everyone one that I pose no problem. My name is Steve and I would like to talk to whom ever I need to so that my friends and I can pass through your town in peace."

" Well the blond man said my name is David and I am willing to hear you out."

"Could we talk with a little less firepower pointing at me?" Steve asks with his hands still in the air.

"Stand where you are and I will get a few chairs so we can sit and talk where you are don't come any closer," David commanded.

Another man walked forward and stood at his side never moving the shotgun leveled at his hip. The two spoke for a moment and the second man left in a quick step. When he returned three folding chairs placed on the ground and everyone took a position for the meeting. David introduced the second man as Dale.

"Well Steve began a group of us are traveling by train to North Carolina and the track we need to use is this one which happens to go through your town. I can promise that we will not stop not even for one second if you say so and we will not take anything from your town."

David spoke now, "how many people are we talking about?"

"Fourteen and everyone will stay on board the train. The travel time would only be a few minutes. If you say no we will have to backtrack about twenty five miles to bypass your town".

Dale spoke this time. "Where are you coming from?" Steve studied him as he replied, "Arlington, Texas."

"So why North Carolina" was the follow up by Dale.

"We have contacts there and I feel it would be a good place to wait things out until things get back to order."

David spoke now; "we have had trouble in the last few days. It came in from some raiders on motorcycles and pick up trucks. Four of our people were injured so we are on guard for anything. Can you prove you are from Texas?"

"Sure" Steve said reaching for his driver's license. As he passed it to David, he also said, "We have a paramedic on board who could look at the medical needs of your people if you like."

"Passing through is all you want" said Dale?

"Yes, but we could render aid if you like."

As the two men stepped away to talk alone Steve took the opportunity to look around, people were clearing up rubble and cleaning buildings that appeared to be in usable condition. Another group carried salvage items of all description to what could be call a central warehouse. Everything appeared to be organized and it was easy to see the progress made in the center part of town.

The two men returned and took a seat; each had a serious look about them. "OK we are going to trust you" David said, "but this is how we want it to be, to insure safety for our people. First, no one gets off the train except you and your medical man. Second I want you to know that you will be covered by at least two sharpshooters at

all times so if something happens you will be shot by at least one of them. Any questions?"

"No" Steve replied, "If I had been having trouble with raiders, I would do the same."

"How long until your people get here" Dale questioned?

"About twenty minutes, they are waiting a mile down the track"

OK David said, "I hope you are a man of your word, we don't want any trouble."

"Neither do we" Steve shot back as he stood and waived to Wes who had been waiting for a sign for what seemed like hours.

"Who are you waving at" Dale snapped.

"My sharpshooter, if you like you can walk over and inspect the train when it gets here, we managed to make it bearable on the trip. Also, you might want to meet the people as I go over the rules with them."

"I will walk with you" David said he turned to Dale and said, "get Mickey and Tony in position."

The two men walked to the station platform and looked down the track. In a few moments, the engine came into view. As it approached, David, ask how did you decide to travel by train?

"Well my friend Mark and I have worked for the railroad for over twenty years each. When everything went down, we knew that to survive not only the war but also the civil unrest and decay of bodies we must move to a less populated area. As everyone discussed options, we all knew the highways would be a maze of wrecks also the roads would be watched by looters and thugs. By using the railroad, we can travel and carry a large amount of supplies with us. That is why I can say to you we don't need to take anything from your town."

The train was now in full view and the sounds from it had stopped all work in the town as people began to move toward the station. Wes had parked the truck in

front leaving room for the passenger car to stop at the loading platform. As Steve and David stepped up to the car, Steve announced to everyone to stay inside until further notice. Moving inside the first car Steve began the introductions of everyone. As they passed into the third car, David was impressed on how Alan had mounted the furniture to the floor. He is one of the best contractors in the state Steve boasted. The thing that David kept returning to was the bank of radio and scanners that Mike had built.

As they left the car, David spoke while they walked across the grass belt that separated the station lot from the street. None of the people in town had moved past this point.

“Your group appears to be on the level I have to be on guard after what happened last time we had strangers visit.”

“Do you want our paramedic to check on the injured?”

“Please.”

Steve spoke with Wes for a moment and he headed off to find those who needed his attention. The group of town’s people still stood at a distance undecided if these new people were friend or foe.

“If you like,” Steve started speaking; again, “you could come with us to North Carolina.”

“Thanks for the offer but this is our home and we aim to rebuild and make a go of it.”

“How many people do you have?”

“At present one hundred and thirty seven. Am I worried about this winter? We are compiling everything that can be salvaged but I am not sure if it will be enough.”

Steve looked at the people as they drifted back to work. “Where is the nearest large city” he ask?

“Well, Clayton is about twenty miles west of here it has or had about twenty or twenty five thousand people. That is the place we went for serious shopping and large purchases.”

“Have you tried to get there?”

“No the main highway is blocked for miles and the secondary roads are not much better.” David expressed with a sigh. “The bad thing is there are so many things we need there but can’t get to them. By the way,” he changed subjects “your people can get off and move about town if they chose to.”

“Thanks, it will be nice for them to get off and stretch their legs a bit, ridding for so long has taken a toll on them.”

Mark climbed down from the cab and was moving about the platform. Steve motioned him over and introduced him. “It seems they have had a bit of trouble with bandits and I have a feeling we may also,” Steve told Mark.

“Yep,” Mark agreed, “when winter sets in and people don’t have enough to eat it is going to get real bad.”

“I have a proposition for you,” Steve said turning to David.

“I am all ears let’s hear it.” “What if we took one engine loose and made a trip to Clayton with some of your people on board. If the tracks are, clear and we can locate some equipment there. Your people can learn to drive a locomotive over that short distance but wouldn’t try to venture a long haul. As they get better at handling the equipment, they could carry more cars at a time and you could get the supplies you need. By stuffing every building to the max plus filling, the siding with stocked railcars you could lay in enough to buy you some time.”

David’s eyes brighten “you would do that for us” he said.

“Sure we would” Mark said.

“Let me call a town meeting” he said a hurried off to gather everyone.

The train was empty now as the Texas group moved about in the depot and yard. Mark got everyone inside and told them of the plan. He said that these people were trying to make a go of it here so we were going to spend two days here to help them get a route clear to haul in supplies. He also said to make a list of things we would need to resupply.

As the evening began to settle in the two groups began to talk and mix with one another. A small band of people from the town had compiled a list of things that they felt were of the most important. As the two groups planned the mission, the question came up about the security of it. Has anyone been there and what is it like.

Dale asks, "How did your group check out the towns you have been passing along the way".

"Well Wes and I first scout the way as I did with this place, if it is empty we move on through. However, we have made it a practice to stay away from large cities for several reasons."

"Like what" one of the town's people ask?

" Well" Wes said "first of all, there is the smell of rotting bodies and the health risk there, also any bands or gangs will naturally gravitate to them for the supplies and fortifications offered by them."

"Another thing" Steve added, "most big cities were hit real hard by multiple weapons so the tracks in that area are to badly damage to carry the train."

"Why not send some people tonight under the cover of darkness they can scout Clayton and return in the evening to make a report" Dale interjected.

"That is exactly what we did the first time when we left our shelter," Wes said.

Dale looked at David and said, "I will take two people and leave within the hour." "Go for it" came the response. Dale scurried off to get his team and vanish into

the night. "While they are gone," Mark said, "pick out a few people to learn how to drive the engine and I will start teaching ASAP."

Walking toward the depot David was talking with the people when it occurred to him to ask about the injured Wes had treated. "How are they?" David asks.

"Well the young man is going to be fifty-fifty, I just don't know, the guy named Mack will be up and around soon but make him take it easy for awhile. The fellow named Ed has a bad break and it could get infected, I set the bone but I can't tell how it will heal."

David looked hard at the ground as he got the news. "How many people lived here before all of this madness started" Wes asks. "About four thousand, this is primarily a farming community with just a few stores. That is why we have so few supplies to brace for the coming winter." "We can help you get some of the fundamentals established for example the radio set up Mike built for us could be set up in an old store. In addition, the area library will be of great value for you with all of the self-help and do it yourself books. A good computer person can also set up a large selection of software to help with task until things get on a smooth road for your group".

David stared at Wes and said, "It would be greatly appreciated if you can help us out." Steve was walking with the group as they made their way back to the train station. He spoke up and said, "If your group would like to go with us, I don't think any of our people would object. What is the total of number people you have in town?"

"One hundred and thirty seven men, women and children."

"Do you think they would want to join us" Mark asks? "I will mention it at the meeting, some may want to go but I feel most will want to stay because this is their home and has been for generations."

As the evening of the first day in town approached, food was brought out for a community meal. Everyone was feeling at ease and mixed freely. When the food

preparation was completed David lead the blessing and made a few announcements including the offer for anyone to join the Texas group if they were so inclined. Music was playing, the young people were getting acquainted and small gathering were exchanging information on various topics. A broad shouldered man moved quietly behind Steve and when the time was right, he spoke.

“My family would like to travel with you if the invitation is still open.”

“Certainly, it is” Steve responded. Come and meet them first”, he suggested. Steve motioned to Kathy and she followed along.

“My name is Marshall Thompson,” he said in a voice slightly stronger than a whisper.

“I am Steve and this is my wife Kathy” came the return.

They stepped to the corner of the depot. On the porch was a woman in her late thirties with three children. Marshall introduced them “my wife Dana, my oldest son Matthew, this is Luke and my daughter Michelle” he said with a smile. Steve introduced Kathy and himself to each of them. Kathy made the first comment about the Thompsons wanting to come. “We will be glad to have you” she said “and I hope you will feel right at home with us.” All of the Thompson family eyes looked to Marshall when he spoke.

“I was raised in Comanche, Texas by good parents. My wife is a Native American. We moved here to take over the farm that belonged to my grandparents about two years ago. They were getting up in years and my parents did not want to leave their ranch. The people in this town have not been mean to us but on the other hand, we don’t feel all that welcome either. Our fear is that being outsiders and with the possibility of some underlying race fears, we could be forced out if the food supply started running low. Do you think it would truly be all right if we came with you?”

Kathy spoke again, “you would be most welcome to join us. Just bring what ever you want to take and we will put it in the baggage car.”

They all smiled and it was plain to see a sigh of relief come over the faces of the Thompsons. Moving to the front of the depot Mark could be seen working inside the front engine with three students for the first class in “train driving 101”.

As morning broke, the smell of breakfast filled the air. Looking out from his sleeping bag Steve could see Kathy, Tami and Blanca working the cooking pots. From the looks of things, they had been up for a while. A large sheet of plywood held cans of tomato juice, punch and canned milk for the coffee that was brewing. Maria and Karen were stacking paper plates and plastic ware for the breakfast crowd. Marci was digging in a pile of boxes and complaining that she would lose her ass if it weren't bolted on.

In the distance, the younger crowd climbed out of the freight car carrying jugs of water. Thinking to himself Steve mumbled, “I hope I am not the last one up”, as it turned out, he was. Using a cup of water to brush his teeth and trying to get moving he made his way on to the porch of the depot facing the south side of the town. Pausing he wondered what it was like to live here before a bunch of crazies tried to destroy the world. He also wondered about his son and silently prayed that he would be all right. He was brought back to the current world by Kathy banging a large pot with a wood spoon, her famous call to eat. It is strange how meals were affected; eggs and bacon were a thing of the past, breakfast now consisted of oatmeal, cereal with powdered milk, biscuits, pancakes and grits not the selection you could get at *IHOP*. As breakfast was eaten, the day's plans unfolded. Mark was going to spend his time working with the future engineers for the town, everyone else was going to put their skills to work helping out wherever they could. Moving across the grass toward main st. Steve could see David hurrying toward him. His excitement came to a boil as they met. “Dale sent Tom back by bicycle and reports the town is all clear not a single bit of movement to report.”

“That sounds great, but it may be a bit early in the day to be completely sure”

“So what do you think?”

“Well lets take the truck and drive up the tracks till we get about a mile from town a small group can work into it a be sure if it looks good we can sent for the engine and the rest of the people.”

“Let’s do it.”

The first team to go consisted of Wes who was the best shot of everyone plus David and four of the town’s people. With Steve at the wheel of the truck, Wes was ridding on the passenger side to serve as guard and instruct the others on how to line a track switch. David positioned himself in the back seat so that he could make plans with Steve on what to do upon arrival.

“It sounds funny but the first thing we need is a phone book of the town,” Steve said.

“What in the world good can that do, we can’t call anyone”, blurted David.

“No but we can look up places of business, addresses and other vital information so we don’t just wander about looking for things.”

“Say that is pretty clever did you think of that on your own.” “No, Kathy actually thought of it. When it comes to shopping, she is the master.”

“They both burst into laughter. I know Theresa is the same way she can smell a bargain like my dog can smell a coon.”

Now everyone inside was laughing. Dale knowing that the crew would arrive by the main rail line coming into the city was waiting at the city limits. The truck pulled to a stop as he waived the down. He approached the window and peered in. “We haven’t seen a sign of life and the smell is incredibility bad.”

“Just think of what it was like the first week.” Wes told him.

“I don’t think I could have taken it,” Dale said with a somewhat sick look on his face.

“Well let’s get the show on the road” David quipped. “What should we do first guys you have been through this before” he said looking at Steve and Wes?

“First, find the phone books plus a city map. Next, we will need a dozer or front loader of some type to clear streets. As this is being done list the things we need to find in the order. We should get the train up here ASAP and start building the cars for the first trip. I would also suggest that we make a stop at the police station and local sporting good store and clear out all of the guns and ammo we can find down to the last bullet.”

“Why take everything,” David asks.

“Because what you don’t take or destroy could be picked up by someone else and used against you.” Wes replied. “We didn’t do that when we left but we knew that we would be traveling, you won’t be moving. So anyone headed here can resupply. It is a good chance the bandits that hit you once could have got to a lot of the stuff first.”

Dale suggested that the train station should be the center of operation because all of the loading would take place there. The old depot fully restored, and rented out for weddings, proms and other special events. It had a very nostalgic design providing a true taste of history to railroad days gone by.

Mark had one of the student engineers bring the single engine to a stop at the platform. Climbing down from the cab, he said, “I think we have a lot of potential in this crew here.” As the party gathered to converse on assignments, the train crew began to sort the cars for the first trip. One of the town’s people a fellow named Gary stepped forward. “I know this place like the back of my hand. There is a *John Deer* dealer a few blocks from here; it will only take a few minutes for me to be back with a loader to start clearing the streets as the routes are planned.” “That sounds good take Pete with you.” David Recommended. The pair headed down the street to begin clearing the way for the supply operation. As the train was being prepared in the yard, the first items for loading were decided upon and located.

"It could take days to complete this" David exclaimed.

"Yes, it could" added Steve "we can help for a day but we need to get moving."

"I understand. If you could advise us on the most essential things we will do the bulk of the work. The city is in much worse shape than I thought."

Mark stepped into the room and announced that John had found six tank cars of diesel and that they planned to take them back with the first trip.

"Where should we start" David asks.

Wes stepped in and offered a suggestion. "Why not take heavy equipment and food back on the first trip. You can start clearing away rubble and make room for the supplies. In addition, I would split my people into two teams' one working at the town and the other here loading railcars."

"Sounds good," David nodded in agreement.

Soon a caravan of generators, construction tractors and dozers descended on to the yard to be loaded. With this task completed a semi truck full of food followed by a truck packed with pallets of bottled water and last but not least another truck full of miscellaneous supplies taken from a sporting goods store began to make their way down the highway. This was risky because no one knew for sure what the road trip would be like. The rail truck followed by the train left first to let everyone know about the road convoy to prevent any panic when the sounds of approaching traffic was heard.

Driving a heavy-duty wrecker, Dale led out the trucks. "This should clear anything we run into" he said. However, four miles into the trip, he was proved wrong. The traffic was a total nightmare with the approach as well as the bridge stacked deep with one wreck after another. From all appearances, people just kept plowing into one another in either the dark or trying to get around other wrecks. Dale looked at the other drivers and said, "Forget it. It would take months and a lot of big equipment to

even make a dent in this crap.” They returned to the city and drove down the railroad track to get back to town.

When Dale reported this to all David said, “Well it could be a blessing if we can’t get through then no one can come in on us from that way so it is one less thing to guard.”

“How did the bandits come in last time” question Steve?

Dale spoke up with a tone of rage in his voice. “They came from the small county road on the East end of town. Two were riding motorcycles and two were in a pickup truck. We had enough shotguns and hunting rifles to chase them away but if they were better armed, they could have killed us all before we could react.” He slammed his fist down and said, “We will be ready for them next time.”

“Sounds like another good reason to clear out all the guns and ammo from Clayton” remarked Mark. Wes spoke up “I would have four or five ammo and weapon dumps through the town. So that no matter what, a weapon is near. If you notice, all of us carry a sidearm at all times. It is bulky but it can buy some time until help arrives.”

“While we are on the subject of defense here is another thing that works for us,” Steve said. “Go to a boating or outdoor store and look for signal flares, the kind that you hold in your hand and pull a cord to fire into the sky. These can be taped to trees or post, with the use of dark colored trip wire they can be early warning devices put out a mile or so from the town limits.”

“What an outstanding idea” Dale shouted looking at Steve “where did you come up with that.” Steve shrugged “I read it once. We use them for perimeter watch each night when we park the train.”

“I hate to see all of you go, the information that you provide is priceless.” “The offer still stands”, Wes, said, “you can go with us if you want to.”

“No this is our home so we will stay and make a go of it.”

Wes questioned the town's water supply. "Well," David answered, "at present we are using the main water tower for all of our needs but no one knows how long that will hold out so we have been using the water very sparingly. The water comes from several large wells and without electric power to operate the pumps we can't refill the tank."

Wes jumped in; "I was a firefighter for Irvin, TX. So I think we can fix that."

"Well I'm all ears," said David.

"First Mike can put on of the generators we brought back on the pump supply circuit. Secondly by stretching the hydrant supply from the water tower down Main Street in place of using the water mains. Which are probably damaged or to large to operate in the limited capacity of the tower. This would give you water over a much larger area. The smaller attack lines can serve as branch lines into key buildings. The only problem is that during the winter, these hoses have to be taken up or they will freeze and bust."

Dale looked at Wes and said, "We have a small volunteer department here with only two trucks a pumper and a tanker. The next time we go to Clayton however, we can bring back their trucks and all of the hose we can find." "Another thing" Wes added "by being a farming community you probably have lots of irrigation piping this can also be used."

Dale commented on how relived it would be have this problem taken care of. "The things we need most are reliable power and water now. The rest will come in time. The small generators we are using are going through gasoline like crazy plus the life span of them is not that great when you run them every day."

Mike spoke up at this moment and said, "Generators taken from the area hospitals, banks telephone companies and other large commercial places could run for years when regularly maintained. We could pull a few and have you up in running soon but it will take a lot of work."

David replied, "We need power now more than anything, to much depends on it".

Mike said, "Give men five strong men and we will start at once."

Dale stepped forward with a legal pad of names; it was the census of the town. "Well" he said, "Luke and Pete stayed behind to clear streets in Clayton. Tommy and Margret went up to help them. So four of our people are tied up there working on that detail."

Kathy, Blanca and Tami gathered about twenty of the people to advise them on how and where to look for supplies. "Well it appears to me the shopping squad is at it again", chuckled Mark.

"By the way, Mark how are the people working out with the train", David asks.

"They are doing well for the most part; it's going to take practice to get them to start off smoothly. I wouldn't advise pulling a heavy load for a while, no more than ten cars. They have the fundamentals down but the rapid acceleration is causing us to change a few knuckles on the cars and they are still trying to learn the difference in the brake systems. It will come in time."

"I guess we should have another town meeting", David said to Dale. "Good idea we can keep things updated and see what all should be moved to the top of the list". The fire station was the site selected and as the people filed in the air filled with a lot of nervous chatter. David stood at the head of the room; with a hush falling, he began to speak. "We have come a long way and there is much more to do. With the help of our newfound friends, I feel we can make it. They will not be with us much longer but we are glad they stopped by to share experience and knowledge with us."

By close of the next day, plans were posted about things to be brought in to town and which building they were to be stored in. Mike had wired up a generator taken from the hospital in Clayton to the water pumps. The volunteer fire department trucks placed at the ready to lay supply lines to bring water to the town. A local

historical hotel was now the living quarters for the town's people. It worked well for all concerned. Private sleeping rooms plus a common kitchen and dinning made food preparation easy with little waste. In addition, by having the one hundred plus people under one roof heating, power and water supply became easy. The train crew was becoming proficient with each trip. Mark and Jeff had moved the Texas train farther up the track to give the Lindsey crew additional track space for storage down the main line. Dale had set flares up at mile and a half mile intervals to provide early warning for intruders. The town had voted to destroy all bridges on the secondary roads leading into the town. It will not keep all of the bandits out but it will slow down the vehicles that bring them. The rail line will be our direct link to the outside and that will make it easy to have only one main road to keep an eye on. Mark offered a little last advice to the young crew. "Keep the sidings full of tank cars because you never know what could come down the main line and hit them. Push you empty tanks as far down the line as you can before you turn them loose to freewheel." Supplies were pouring in on a constant flow and the Texas team prepared to leave.

Marshall and the rest of his family bid the folks of Lindsey farewell. Settling into the new world and new friends the Thompsons stored their gear and climbed on board. Wes and Steve were preparing the truck to lead out when David walked to the truck with his hand extended. His voice was low and a trace of sadness in it. "We can never thank all of you enough for the help and encouragement provided by this collection of people who I feel God sent this way. I can truly say we will never forget all of you."

Steve responded in a solemn voice "neither shall we? The picture Kathy took of your town's people will be placed in our meeting hall along with a Bible so that we will always know that good people are still left in the world."

"Take care of yourself" said David as he patted Wes on the shoulder. "Come see us if you can" Wes said.

The truck door closed and they were off. Kathy had assembled the town's people in front of the depot, with the sign in the view for a picture. In turn, the Texas crew had also been photographed in the same location. With the aid of a computer printer copies made, names recorded on the back and photos given to each group. Steve had noticed several people on board the train had been keeping journals of their experiences. Kathy wrote in hers on a daily basis. She told Steve one evening after they had settled in for the night "I don't ever want to forget this and if something happens to us, someone may find this and know what it was really like."

"It could be a documentary or movie one day." Steve told her.

Pulling away in the truck Wes spoke with a somber tone "I hope they make it, the future of our nation depends on groups of people like them." Checking the map Steve announced, "The next town was a place called Hooverville."

"Did you say Hooterville" Wes joked?

"Well if I did, you would be right at home. It looks like we should be on it soon."

CHAPTER 5

"Stopping to check a small bridge" Wes said into the radio as he eased on the brakes. As Steve was giving the bridge, a good once over Jeff eased the train to a stop behind them. "We didn't keep much space between us he bellowed climbing down from the cab." Marshall came walking forward from the passenger car. Speaking to the men at the truck, he stated, "I never was much for setting on my butt when there is work to be done. What can I do to help out around here?"

“Well” Wes replied, “You can ride with us and line switches.” “It’s a deal; just show me when and where.”

Wes motioned to the truck and Marshall jumped onboard. When Steve returned to the truck, he looked at Marshall and said, “At last someone intelligent for me to talk to.” Wes threw an empty fruit cocktail can at the passenger window missing Steve by inches. The backseat of the truck was full of gear but standing the Barret and the sniper rifle cases on end and pushing the cooler to the right side a place was made for the new member of the “*Lead Dogs*” as Steve called them. Crossing the bridge, the Hooverville marker was only one hundred yards away so Wes and Steve told everyone to sit tight while they checked out the town. With Marshall in tow, carrying the sniper rifle Wes packed the Barret up a small knoll to the woods overlooking the town. Steve began his walk to the edge of the clearing much as he did in Lindsey. This time however thing did not go as smooth. Just as he moved into the clearing, the sound of gunfire filled the air. Diving behind the embankment Steve could hear shouting and more firing. However, none of it was directed at him. Peering over the top, he could not believe what was taking place. In the street parallel to the tracks a blue van had came to an abrupt halt, on the ground beside it was a man sprawled out face down with what appeared to be a nun lying a few feet away in the fetal position. Young people were pouring out of the van and running to the ditch a second nun was desperately trying to keep them under control amidst all of the confusion. The shooting was coming from a small grocery store with no windows left intact and from behind an overturned dump truck. Steve opened fire with his CAR-15 at once catching

the shooters by surprise



Wes dropped down to take up position and sent Marshall back to the train to bring help. Wes's instruction was "bring all of the firepower you can and hurry!" Not having a clear shot with the .50cal, Wes opened up with his CAR -15 also. This would at least provide some covering fire for Steve and he could fire much faster than with the big 50. The attackers not sure what to do retreated inside. Steve yelled to the Nun to stay put and he would get them out. The ditch was now full of students huddling together and not sure what to do next. With Wes on the hill and Steve moving back and forth behind the railroad embankment they could keep things in check until help arrived.

As the train members arrived, Wes deployed them into groups along the ridge. Marshall and Jeff joined Wes's position Mark, Kathy, Blanca and Marci moved to the left Alan, Karen and Tami went to the right Mike was working his way along the bank toward his dad. Maria, Mathew and Luke were placed to the far right and told to hold their fire unless directed. They will be flanking fire if needed, thought Wes. Angela and Amber were working with Dana as ammo runners from the train. In less than sixty

seconds, Wes had organized a complete skirmish line with supply runners. Mike was working toward his dad when a shot came from the store giving away a position. Everyone opened fire and the noise was that of a tornado, bomb explosion and volcano eruption all at once. The amount of firepower unleashed equaled that of a platoon of Marines crossed Steve's mind as he could see from his angle. Pieces of window, window frame and cinderblock flew from the store in every direction.

As this was taking place, Steve along with Mike poured two full magazines into the dump truck. "No one moving from there" they said to each other. After a few seconds the firing stopped. Wes now had Mark, Marshall and Alan move at a flanking angle to cover the rear of the store.

"They will try the backdoor if they can so cut them off and keep them inside. But don't get around to far and get hit by any of our stuff" he cautioned.

The trio moved out at a breakneck speed to seal any escape plans the store people may have made. "Ryan come by me" Wes called, "take the sniper rifle and throw a well-placed shot at the dump truck for me every few minutes. It will keep them still while we work the store. Blanca you and Tami come here," Wes shouted! Both women ducking for cover made their way to him. "I need the two of you to take these binoculars and sweep the inside of the store for me. It is hard to get a good field of view through this scope". The women picked up the field glasses and went to work scanning the store for anything that might give a position away.

Steve was still yelling to the people in the ditch to stay put that help was on the way. With Mike at his side, they kept moving for position on the dump truck. The remainder of the group held their fire waiting for another chance to show these vermin what they could do. Ryan was making life miserable for the two behind the dump truck. Each move brought a round down on top of them. Eventually one of them broke for the store. That was all that was needed. The air filled with noise and lead, the slob

did the dance of death as about thirty rounds hit him simultaneously. "That looked like something out of a Sam Peckinpah movie," Steve said to Mike.

On the hill, people were pulling out empty magazines and replacing them with fresh ones. This action caused movement in the store and Tami picked up on it. She said to Wes, "up front near the cash register." "I got him," Wes answered. The *Barret 50* thundered. The report of this rifle was so loud and different from anything heard up to this point that all eyes were upon it. The bad guy was now a permanent fixture on the wall of the store.

As the sound was drifting away, a new sound was approaching. It was the sound of motorcycles. Apparently, this was the leader because the bad guys suddenly felt cocky. They began firing back at the hill with a renewed energy. Blanca was watching the approaching riders. "Well Wes, we got two motorcycles and a pickup truck heading into town," she said in a matter of fact tone of voice. "Here's the plan" Wes said "spread the word not to fire until I do. We want them at the point of no return when we open up." Both women headed out to deliver the message.

"Ryan when I fire, try to put one right in the driver's windshield".

"Got it, he responded."

In the back of his mind Wes was thinking, these are the same bastards that hit Lindsey. The lead rider was a fat slob named J.R. Moore; he had never been good for anything except causing trouble. Now with the world in upheaval, he was in his element. No cops, no rules just do as I please. His number two man was called Harper. Just a loud mouth bully, who knew if you were loud and threatening, few people would challenge you. In the pickup was Norris who lived to drink and be as worthless, as life would let him. Last but not least riding shotgun was Baker, just a smaller version of Norris. Hearing the gunfire, they sped toward the town. J.R. thinking I will kick some ass if they are wasting ammo again.

As he drew closer, Wes took careful aim leading him just right. The roar of the *Barret* filled the air again. Moore did a complete flip off the hog and landed on the pavement with the sound of a wet towel slapping a locker room floor. Right on, cue Ryan launched the 30.06 round through the windshield of the pick up. It began a series of wild "Z" shaped swerves from side to side and plowing into a utility pole. Baker climbed from the truck in somewhat of a daze but his daze was cleared along with his brains as he stepped right in front of Steve. Harper watched wild eyed as J.R.'s bike skidded on its side for several hundred feet down the road. In his confusion, he hit the fat gob that once was his leader and went down hard. This spill saved his life but only for a few seconds. As before, the hills and surrounding area erupted in a volley of fire the made Harper look like Sam Peckinpa the sequel. The surviving bad guys now in a state of panic with their leaders splattered like run over possums, ran out the back of the store. Right into the arms of the ambush team, the trio had been waiting patiently and patience had paid off in spades. The first four out the door were cut to ribbons and only two made it back inside unharmed. The lone dump truck hold out thinking he was forgotten dashed for the cover of a nearby ditch. Mike unleashed a burst that made short work of the sprint. Looking at his dad, he said, "Well that leaves the store."

Tami spotted another target and called to Wes. With one squeeze of the trigger, another slime ball went to meet his maker. Inside the store, a voice called out. It was a woman's voice bordering on hysteria and shear madness. "Please I can't take it anymore; I am the only one left!" Steve told Mike start working your way to the children." I will move in from here." Mike began a low crawl toward the terrified students in the ditch. He called for them to stay down that he was on the way. Dashing to the dump truck and stepping over the downed gunman who moments before had put two rounds with inches of his head. Steve paused to look at him. "Yep! Your days

of being a bad ass are over.” He worked to the corner of the building and positioned himself for a clear shot.

Yelling inside he yelled for the occupants to step into the street. “Do it now”, he commanded “or I will burn this place down with you in it.” The voice cried out “I’m coming, I’m coming don’t shoot, please don’t shoot”. She moved out through the remains of a window. Pointing his .45 sidearm at her Steve spoke very direct to her, “if anything happens I will surely kill you. Now listen to me, is there anyone else in there alive.” “Yes,” she said in a quivering tone, “but he is hurt very badly.”

With Wes providing cover, several of the people on the hill moved down to help the students get to safety. They collected themselves and hurried to the trees. Wes told Ryan keep the sniper rifle handy, “I going to check on the hostages.” Ryan peered through the scope as Blanca and Tami kept working the binoculars in search of any late arrivals to the fight. An examination reveled skinned knees and frayed nerves but all in all things were all right. The Nun was named Sister Carol as Wes continued checking the students over she was talking so rapidly that at times no one could understand her. One the girls began to explain the events leading up to the ordeal.

“We have been trying to make our way home to Pittsburg for a long time. The church sent us to a gathering with students from all across the country. After the war broke out, we started making out way home the best way we could.”

Sister Carol calmed down a bit and jumped into the conversation. “The roads are a total mess and we have been winding all over the country trying to get home. First, we go one way then another. It is impossible to make much progress. We have traveled at night when we could to avoid being seen. But, we didn’t see a soul, so we started traveling during the day. I just can’t believe it has happen to us.”

As Wes was handling this part of the event, Steve was dealing with the mop up portion of the firefight. Step forward he commanded and she complied. From the

back of the building, he heard Mark call out. "Is it clear?" He answered back "I have one out front but there is a wounded one inside."

"We'll take him".

With his rifle slung over his shoulder and .45 at the ready. He motioned for the girl to move to the wall. She was stocky built with rusty red hair and a real shitty attitude that recently been deflated. From inside could be heard the definite West Texas accent of Mark. "On you feet asshole, you ain't hurt that bad".

"So who are you and what's all about", Steve demanded in a tone that said I have no problem in dropping you just like all the rest.

"My name is Sharon she replied and it is quite simple. We wanted the girls."

"What!" Steve screamed. With that, Marshall came jumping through what once was the front door. Looking at Steve, he questioned, "Alright."

"Alright, my ass, come here quick before I kill this bitch on the spot." Sprinting toward the two he could tell this was no idle threat.

"This cold-hearted bitch said they were after the girls."

"What for", he asks in wonder.

"Tell him, tell him now!"

Sharon began to speak again. "Well the girls would be a valuable trade item to anyone we wanted to do business with."

Looking very upset he asks, "And the boys?"

"No market for them," she replied, in a cold and indifferent manor.

Inside Mark and Alan were questioning the wounded man and getting for the most part the same answers.

"Have you traded girls before?"

"No but we felt after using them for ourselves that sooner or later someone would come along and want them."

"Well here, ole buddy let me help you with that bullet wound",

Mark stepped forward with a box of salt taken from the store shelf. Using his knife, he cut the top off and poured it straight into the open hole. "Fat Joe" as he was known began to thrash around the floor and yelling like an Apache in the western movies. "Sit down" said Mark in an agitated voice. Poking him with the barrel of his gun. Alan moved to the street where Marshall was holding Sharon. Some of the people had taken the students and Sister Carol back to the train and others had walked to the street. Steve was sitting on a wooden box near the store when Kathy came to rest beside him. "You won't believe it", he started, looking at her.

"The plan was to sell the girls and kill the boys!"

"It couldn't be that" she screeched.

"Yes, it can."

"So what about me" Sharon asks looking around, "you planning on killing me." "No", Jeff stepped forward and answered. "You have to deal with this on your own. No one will take you in now and your boyfriend will be dead soon. So it will be you all alone with what you have done. There is not another person for a hundred miles of this area, so deal with it." With that, he turned to walk away.

Mike along with several others had carried the bodies of Sister Rhonda and Tom the driver to a small grassy area and began digging to burry them. "It is the least we can do", he said, "They shouldn't layout here on the road with the trash that killed them." As the main body of people moved toward the train, several lagged behind. First, they gathered all of the weapons breaking them as they went. "No chance of killing anyone else who comes by," Alan said. Secondly, Steve and Mark helped the healing process of "Fat Joe" by giving him a little Texas justice.

"We respect our women and sell our cattle," Mark said as his big burly fist smashed into Joe.

"I'm not going to bruise my hand on him," Steve stated as he located a section of 2x4. "Kill and sell will you", he said as he brought down the board. "Well we don't have the police to turn you over to, so it is back to frontier justice for now."

When they walked away the bullet hole in "Fat Joe's" shoulder was the least of his worries and brought the smallest amount of pain. Sharon watched in the grasp of Alan and Marshall. Suddenly it dawned on her that she was alone and none of her tough guys were around. She also knew that her favors and special talents did not pack much influence with these guys. She began to cry "What about me, what about me?"

"Well I still don't think being alone is enough. To just walk away sounds a little soft for me", Mark stared at her. "I can't kill a woman in cold blood," he said. "For then I would be no better than you. But I can give you something to think about. In the Comanche tribe, a girl with one to many bucks got a **dirty nose scar**". He pulled his knife and cut a long slit hooking the blade in the nostril. "You will remember today every time you see yourself."

As they turned and walked away, she was on her knees bleeding on Joe. The profanity would make a sailor blush.

The graves completed and Jeff offered up a prayer. The remainder of the people moved toward the train. Jeff was walking next to Steve he posed the question softly so the response would not be heard, "you didn't...." "No but it took a lot of self-restraint."

Back at the train silence was so thick you could cut it with a knife. The weapons stored, to be cleaned later. Tears filled some eyes and several sat with their head drooped. It was a combination of fatigue and shock over what they had just been through. Sister Carol broke the quiet moment by speaking softly.

"I thank God you were there when we needed you. By now, many of us would be dead and the others would have a terrible fate ahead."

Jeff spoke "now let's put some distance between us and this place."

CHAPTER 6

The truck crew moved out with train close behind. The shootout in Hooverville was over. Marshall wanted to ride up front and work switches for a while. Steve gladly changed places with him. As the trio paced themselves from the train, the conversation picked up.

"That was a good job Wes; you saved my hide several times", Steve commented.

"Well", Wes replied, "I was in a good location to see all of the action."

"Being a good shot didn't hurt either," Steve passed back.

"We only have about three hours of daylight left and there is not a town or yard on the map for a good night camp."

"What looks good to you", Wes queried. "About two more hours and we can look for an open spot."

With the evening meal polished off, chatter had returned to the travelers. With the addition to the group, Kathy had mentioned to Steve that more passenger cars were needed. "We have outgrown the current room for ridding in addition to sleeping quarters." The Thompsons were five and now six boys and four girls and Sister Carol has increased our population a lot in the last few days.

"I will keep an eye out for them", he promised.

Breakfast was a chore to prepare, even with the additional help it took a lot of time. The prep crew, the cooking crew and even with the use of paper plates and plastic forks, large pots still needed cleaning. Putting away equipment took an hour. Kathy was still faithful in ensuring each person got a vitamin. The young people were eager to do their part and Sister Carol put them into the thick of the chores. Kathy and Blanca brought coolers to the truck as the "*Lead Dogs*" were preparing it for departure.

"Please be careful out there today", she said. "Yesterday really scared me."

"I am careful every day", he tried to comfort her. "It was a little unnerving for me also."

Marshall came dashing forward, "don't leave without me, I was just getting some last minute instructions from Dana." The five stood in a semi-circle looking at the railroad map with the road atlas spread out beside it.

Blanca offered input, "We will need to resupply soon."

Kathy added, "And don't forget about the extra cars also."

"How about here", Wes was pointing to a town on the map called Weston, "it is listed at 35,000 people."

With his finger on the rail map Steve followed the track line and said, "Looks good. We will make for it and plan to stop for a day." Moving out in the truck the men began to talk among themselves.

"The big places were the ones we were trying to avoid and we could have bought it in a place like Hooverville."

"I'm glad we had the firepower from the police equipment. When we stop in Weston, I have an idea."

"Well throw it out and kick it around."

"A town that size probably has a National Guard unit let's look for it and see if we add some real muscle to our punch."

“Great plan! We should have thought of it first.”

Two hours after the start a train was blocking the track. Steve suggested that instead of dumping the cars down the siding as they had been doing, to check the content first. “We might be throwing away some good stuff”, he offered.

Jeff put the train into a siding about a mile back while Mark stood by to check car speed. The first one went by at about three miles an hour. Mark said that they might have to come and pull them if it went any slower. Marshall was learning how to bleed and cut cars as Wes moved ahead checking the contents of each. So far they were empty or had bales of cardboard in them. Five cars in a row contained bricks from front to rear. “Oh! Lord” Steve said when he seen them “these babies will go like rockets when they get rolling”. Calling to Mark, he warned him five heavies on the way, turning them loose at one hundred yard intervals; it was obvious to the truck crew by the sound they made rolling away that this was not a standard car. Watching them go out of sight Steve mentioned an empty boxcar weighs 93,000lbs. “In this case, the cargo may pass four times that. When they hit the first cars released, it is a good chance they will derail the whole mess.”

Back onboard, the students plus the Thompson kids was watching the cars go by like floats at a parade. Kathy was also keeping an eye on them; she knew that only when the engine consists went by that things were secure. In addition, she was silently hoping to hear Steve call for the front engine meaning he had found cars they could use.

As Wes moved from car to car, nothing of value was turning up. Eight lumber cars, several wood chip cars, numerous carloads of Portland cement and finally more empty cars of assorted types. The engines rolled on their way to the rear and it was back on the track to cover more miles. Marshall spoke as they moved along. “How did these trains stop and what kept them from running into each other.” Steve explained about how on each train a dead man switch built into it that automatically has stopped

them if the train engineer failed to operate a control or tap a button in the cab within a certain amount of time. The train goes into emergency mode and slows to a stop. The dispatchers set the spacing and the train crews read and radio the signal information as we pass them. "So we shouldn't see another train for two miles." "Well then," Marshall said, "we can relax for a bit can't we." "Not completely, remember if the air leaks off the train, we could see one coming at us like the cars we have been turning loose, only it will be a complete train." "The thought of that just scares the crap out of me," he replied. A small bridge caught their eye and Wes slowed to a stop. He radioed the train as his two traveling partners stepped out to check it over. The far side of the creek bank was burnt for as far as the eye could see in both directions. "It looks like a bad fire made it to this point and couldn't go on," Steve observed. "Good thing the bridge is made of steel", Marshall responded "or it could have crossed and kept going."

"Yep,"

"And if we had to backtrack, we would run into all of those cars we pushed down the track."

"Absolutely correct, it could take days to clear the track behind us."

With the bridge secure, they moved onward keeping a wary eye on the crossties for the burned condition of them. "It looks like the flames were moving too fast to do them much harm," Wes observed. "Must have been a strong wind pushing it along." The area charred for as far as visible on both sides for the next three miles. The remains of building and equipment dotted the landscape to give a grizzly reminder of the power behind unchecked fire. "Let's hope that Weston isn't reduced to rubble, we need the supplies."

Off in the distance Wes could make out a truck moving in the same direction. "Look!" he said his voice filled with excitement, "we've got company. I hope they are friendly" Steve moaned, "No more Hooverville for me." "Clocking the speed of the

truck with our vehicle we should meet them any place the track crosses the road.” Wes blew the air horn mounted on the roof receiving a response from the highway truck. “What should we do now he asks?” “Keep pace with them and let’s see where we go from here.” Angling very slightly it appeared the two would intersect soon. At that point, Steve noticed the yard sign for Weston. Looking at the road atlas, he judged they were on state road 541. “Yep, he said we will cross soon.” Arriving at the crossing the truck occupants took cover and waited for the train scouts to pull in to them. Wes had warned Mark to lay back but come running hard if he hollered for help. Stopping at a distance of two hundred feet, the crew moved to cover behind their truck. It appeared to be a stand off for a few moments, but Steve stepped to the front and spoke, “can we help you?” “Let’s meet and talk” came back. “Cover me and I will see if it is friend or foe.” Wes said, “If it turns out to be foe hit the ground and we will turn loose with everything we have.” “Well here goes.” Stepping into the opening and walking toward the pickup prompted a person on the other side to step out. They stopped to talk about midpoint. Steve extended his hand,

“Steve is my name.”

“Robert here” he replied.

“Looks like we are going the same way” Steve pointed toward Weston.

“Actually,” Robert said, “we have been trying to catch up to you for awhile”.

“Really?”

“Yes, we heard your train and tried to find you but we could never make contact.”

“How long have you been trying?”

“Over two weeks, we have a couple of road maps with some rail lines on them plus we knew you were avoiding major cities so we just tried to work out your plan and get ahead of you.”

“Did you pass through a town called Lindsey?”

"Not that I remember."

"Well we were there for several days helping them out."

"No then, I know we didn't pass through it then because we haven't found anyone alive so far."

"Your train makes a lot of noise so we tracked you by sound sometimes and with the highway system in such a mess we had to make large detours on several roads to get back in touch with the route we hoped you were taking."

"Well we have lost time here and there. We were involved in a heavy shootout in a town called Hooverville."

"We passed through it".

"It was a bad place for us I will give you the details another time. You didn't see anyone there."

"No but we found some people shot to bits in the street a few more inside and a woman hanged from a rafter inside a grocery store. You guys didn't do that, did you?"

"No, we didn't hang anyone; did you say it was a woman?"

"Yep, redhead to be exact."

"Well she did that to herself."

"Really, it did look like a case of suicide but I couldn't be sure."

"Yes, she was the only one not to die in the gunfight. But, I have to tell you she was one cold-hearted bitch that deserved to die, but none of us wanted to be the one to just execute her in cold blood. Our plan is to resupply in Weston, you can load up with us there if you like."

"Sounds good, we are running low on things too."

"I'm not sure how far it is and if the service road will run by the track all the way to town."

"Well, we will follow it as far as we can before getting back on the road."

As the train pulled into the yard at Weston Steve introduced Robert and his family to every person on board and told them how they had been following in hopes of making contact. The yard was located on the north side of town and the first order of business was to locate a place to live for a day or two during the resupply operation. Mike made the best discovery in the living arrangements. About a mile from the tracks stood, a small motel called *The Roadside Motel* the key in this choice was the sign out front reading "*closed for remodeling*". This was a welcome relief the weary travelers because they knew the rooms would be empty with no dead bodies to deal with. Even with the amount of time that had passed the smell of death was still in the air. It had not rained to cleanse the sky or the earth of the effects associated with the war. The vacant motel would be a great change to sleeping in depots or on board the train.



At

last, privacy could be had. The team swung into action and once again, no one was giving orders or directions. All involved seemed to know just what to do. Wes and Mike came to Steve and suggested they go into town and locate water and power

equipment. They moved off in the service truck saying, "if you hear any shooting come a running." Marshall had taken a heavy hammer from the truck and with one strong swing the office door opened. He returned with a board full of room keys. Kathy took a room key and the master utility key. "We will need this for the sheets and towels." Others picked keys from the board and began moving toward rooms. Sister Carol had several in her hand and announced that all of her students would stay in adjacent rooms so she could keep an eye on them. They chose roommates and followed her. As she walked them to their quarters for the next few days, her voice could be heard across the yard. "I trust you to be the ladies and gentlemen that you are however, I will be watching you."

The motel was a typical "U" shaped design and by appearances, only the right side was still under construction. In the center of the "U" was an empty pool with a restaurant in front facing the highway?" "Let's hope the guys can get power the kitchen" Marci said walking with Blanca down the corridor." I am getting tired of cooking on those gas grills." Robert had been using his truck to shuttle equipment from the train and in the course of several trips all; supplies lay piled in front of the rooms. Alan and Mark had been checking out the area to see where a good vantage point would be in case problems developed. "We may not be alone," they told Steve as plans were made about the events of the coming days. Looking to his right Steve could see a maids cart moving down the sidewalk stacked high with linen. Kathy paused and said

"I am sleeping on clean sheets tonight after a long hot bath".

Poking at her Steve said, "what if we can't get the power on to heat your water?"

She put her hands on her hips and looking at him without cracking a smile, her reply was," well you will be busy building a fire and carrying buckets then won't you."

"Only if we can share the bath" he shot back.

She threw a small bar of motel soap at him and went back to pushing the cart.

Off in the distance the sound of vehicles could be heard. I hope it is not going to be trouble Steve thought reaching for his rifle. Others began to arm themselves. The memories of Hooverville still fresh in their minds. This time they would not have the element of surprise on their side. Instead, they would be pinned down by a force that could move and flank at will. Total relief came over them when a red fire truck appeared. "Only Wes would be driving that", Blanca joked as she watched her husband move closer. Behind followed Mike towing a large generator. As the two men entered the parking lot, Mike spoke "we hit the mother load of stuff". The back of the service truck was loaded with electrical gear. With the generator position near the main service box Mike began wiring in the power. Several men piled on the fire engine with Wes and he drove off to find the nearest water supply. In about an hour, they returned, after a few moments Wes used a double female adapter from the truck. He made the connection to the water supply in the hose cabinet outside the office. In a moment, he drove off dropping the hydrant lay back to the water source. Water began to fill the line causing the water system in to rooms to spring to life. When Wes walked, back to check out his handy work he said, "Thank goodness for check valves". "What do you mean by that", Marshall asks?" "Well" Wes explained, "The valve on the water main lets water into the motel but prevents it from going back to the main. So we can pump water into the rooms without filling the entire city water main. I used every foot of hose on the truck to run the water from a water tank to here. The truck is sitting at the tank with the pump building the pressure to push the water here." Mike in the meantime was completing the wiring job involving the generator to the main panel box. He then asks for a group of volunteers to go to each room and shut off every thing so when the power came on it would not overload the circuits. Once again, the young people swung into action completing the task in moments. As the

generator started, it seemed to Steve that it had been years since he had seen lights on in a building. He observed to Kathy. "I know baby", she replied, "The last few weeks feel like years. With lights working and the water on and private rooms complete with clean sheets it was like a holiday."

Tami and Marci walked to Kathy and began discussing the food plans for the next few meals. Steve still standing near by, over heard the conversation. Offering some input, he suggested that a *Kroger* store was just around the corner and he would take a truck to pick up whatever they needed. The women moved to the restaurant at the front of the motel and began to survey the damage to it. The windows like many in the rooms were broken but the building was other wise secure.

"I believe we can make this work" Marci spoke breaking the silence.

"Well it needs a good cleaning", Dana added.

"All right, what about this", Kathy placed a sheet of paper on the counter "let's make a grocery list and Steve and I will go shopping for the food."

Across the way in the office Mark, Wes and Jeff were looking through a phone book and marking locations on a city map. "It should be dark in about four hours", Jeff observed. "We need to make plans for tonight's security." "Once again, the amount of details to be worked out is amazing", Mark said looking out the window. "It is time for another meeting", Jeff offered. "Yep!" Answered Wes, "how about after supper?"

As Steve and Kathy climbed into the service truck to *go to the store* as he put it, she looked at him and said, "Do you guys ever clean this thing out?"

"Well sort of", he grinned.

Kicking empty cans out on the ground as she seated herself she asks "define sort of"?

"Whenever we get a few moments we rake it out."

With list in hand, they backed up to the front of the store. As Steve wrestled, a shopping cart free from the mangled pile, Kathy stepped inside. Their eyes meet and she could not speak. For a moment, they just stared at each other. Steve still

occupied with the cart pile. Kathy moves forward in the dim light of the store. Yes! It was true; she called to it softly trying not to frighten it. It was a dog. The dog had been eating at a pile of dog food spilled on the floor. The bag had no doubt been chewed open and poured out, she called to it again and it began to move toward her in a very unsure way. With its head lowered and tail between her legs, she had the look about her as though she had had an accident on the carpet. Kathy was kneeling as the dog moved to within five feet of her. Using her most calming voice, she coaxed the dog to her. "Poor! Thing" as she patted the still nervous dog on the head. "It's going to be alright now. I've got you." The dog moved to Kathy's arms appearing to feel at ease. "Look what I found," Kathy called to Steve as he entered the store pushing a cart and towing another behind him.

"Where," he questioned?"

"Right here", pointing at the pile of food the dog had been eating from.

"Well sport today is your luck day", he said leaning over to pet the dog. She was covered in dirt and grime from head to tail and appeared to be under feed. However, Steve knew that was about to change. Retrieving a leash from the pet aisle, he snapped it to her collar, Kathy lead her to the outside and tied her to the bumper of the truck. As Steve carried several cans of *Alpo* and bottled of water to her. With the aid of bowls from the house ware aisle and his Swiss Army knife a feast was about to begin.

They moved about picking up the foodstuffs and other items on the list. "Well, we need more boxes" Steve announced as he entered the stockroom. On each trip to the truck with supplies, each of them would stop a pet the dog.

"What should we call her", Steve asks.

"Underneath the dirt on her collar it has the name Dixie but we should call her lucky" Kathy replied.

The truck now a mountain of boxes with everything from toothbrushes and hygiene supplies to bottled water. In the backseat, Steve had stacked four cases of

canned dog food followed by four large bags for the new addition to the traveling train. Kathy had also tossed in two bars of *Lava* and two of *Ivory* soap plus shampoo for the sole purpose of scrubbing the dog.

"I'm glad it is a short ride to the motel", Steve said as he opened the door to the truck. "This stuff is piled so high I don't think it will ride very far." Kathy opened the back door and Dixie jumped right in with no reservation. "It's like she has always been our dog", Kathy stated climbing into the cab.

"What breed do you think she is", Steve asks.

"I think a Golden Retriever but I won't know until she has had a good bath. She is so covered with soot and grease it is hard to tell."

As the truck backed to the restaurant door, a line was forming to assist with the unloading. During the shopping trip, the inside swept clean and all debris tossed into a pile. With the exception of the missing windows and doors, it appeared to be open for business.

Excitement abounded when everybody spotted Dixie in the backseat of the truck. As Kathy recounted the story, the question asked, what's her name. Kathy replied, "I think I will call her Weston to remember where we found her." Angela, Amber and Michelle volunteered to give her a bath. Kathy handed over the leash and the girls ran off to find a vacant room with soap, shampoo and brushes in their hands and smiles on their faces. "This will be a sight to see", Jeff said as he watched his daughter in the lead with Weston pulling her at a fast pace.

Boxes stacked on the ground so that toiletries were available for the taking. Foodstuffs piled high along the wall as the evening meal planned. Mike had secured the power hookup so the diner was now in full swing.

Mark called Steve aside and filled him in on the discussion about the planned meeting for tonight and the list of task to be covered. He also told him that Wes had recommended for several lookout post to be established for the remainder of the day.

The high school students paired up and positioned with field glasses and handguns to fire warning shots if they spotted any movement.

"Sounds like you have been busy while I went shopping" Steve smarted at him.

"Well somebody has to do the work around here we all can't go shopping with our wives," Mark cracked back at him.

"We made several good finds in the phonebook"

"Like what?"

"Well, they have a National Guard Unit so that could mean equipment."

"Very good"

"Also, we located a wholesale food distribution warehouse"

"Very good again"

"We made a list of clinics and doctors offices that could offer medical supplies."

"You guys are on the ball!"

"There is more but I will fill you in later."

As darkness approached, the lookouts called in and each reported no movement observed. "Well that sounds encouraging for tomorrow's work schedule." Tami knowing that the evening meal would be served soon went to check on the dog washing progress. When she entered, the room she made a sudden stop and burst into hysterical laughter, Weston was sitting patiently in the tub enjoying the attention she was receiving and the girls were soaked to the bone and displayed streaks of mud front head to foot. Angela heard her mom's laughter and turned to her, announcing that they were almost finished. Amber piped in that they had changed the water in the tub four times because it became so dirty." Well from the looks of things, it may take four washings to get all of you clean. Hurry up we will be eating soon".

Once again, Kathy was out front with a large pot and wooden spoon calling for the evening meal. Chores stopped and as each person entered the diner, they were

amazed at the appearance of the room. A large stack of real plates, glasses plus stainless flatware. The norm had become paper and plastic on board the train due to the ease of storage. The food was arranged buffet style with large pots of spaghetti, vegetables, ham steaks, rice and bowls of canned fruit. However, the thing that stood out the most was fresh baked bread and pies. There was even homemade pizza, a huge hit for the younger crowd. At the far end of the counter were drinks of every kind including red or white wine. Wes had removed the co2 extinguishers' from the fire truck before he put it at the water supply. Now a short burst cooled them to perfection without the need of ice.

The girls returned with Weston, it was a dramatic change from her first appearance to the group. Her coat now shown clean except for a few small grease spots, as she danced around going from person to person. Kathy had prepared a special place for her to eat. Her new master was going all out with canned and dry food plus left over meat scraps. The dog settled at her feet and started to chow down on what was likely the best meal she had eaten in weeks. The conversations were lively and topic varied from table to table but each person wondered how this dog survived all that had happen over the last few weeks.

When the meal was over Marci stood on her chair and said, "I have an idea!"

Mark jumped in with "Will wonders never cease," as the place roared in laughter she threw a biscuit at him.

Responding to this he said," I can tell you didn't make that one it's to soft to be yours".

The place erupted again. "Anyway", she spoke no long paying him any attention "with all of the girls doing tonight's cooking I think the men should do the cleaning".

"Control her will you Mark," yelled Alan taking a shot to the ribs by Karen's elbow.

It was Wes who jumped to his feet and said "we can do it right guys?" "Sure we can" Steve echoed back. "We will show you how to clean up a place!

On that note, the ladies left the room and the men took over.

"First, let's think this out", said Wes.

"Speak to us", said Mark

"Well this place is full of dishes and such after all it's a diner. So we will just throw away the dirty ones."

"Alright!" Came from Marshall

Next, Wes went on "only the pots need to be reused so we can wash them in short order and leftovers can go out with the dishes."

"Time to put the team into action", offered Robert

Therefore, it went. It took about thirty minutes to toss and wash the whole thing. During this time, the women enjoyed a glass of wine and decided to visit the video store next to the grocery. Each room had a TV/DVD so they piled into the trucks and off they went. In order to accommodate everyone they made two trips. The young people were loading up on the games and animation section while the women pursed the selections more carefully. Again, the shuttle service ran as everyone settled in for a quiet evening. Seeing the entire event take place the men decided the meeting would be postponed until morning.

"Well how was that hot bath?" Steve questioned as he entered the room.

"Great, I soaked and soaked some more. Then I put on my brand new PJ's what do you think? "

"Couldn't you find any with feet in them?"

"No," she responded throwing her hairbrush at him.

"Well I'm planning on a long hot shower myself. Want to wash my back?"

"Sorry, you're too late", she laughed. "But I did layout some new clothes for you."

Moving to the bathroom Steve began his shower and shave. Singing the praises of hot water and how glad it would be to sleep in a bed tonight.

"So, what do you think?" As he returned to the bedroom.

"I don't know who you are, but we better hurry my husband will be back soon."

He threw a wet towel at her and she almost fell off the bed dodging it. Sitting on the foot of the bed Steve picked up the movie she had selected. *"Must love Dogs,"* he said.

"Well, it has Diane Lane in it"

"Yes! Yes it does!"

"And John Cusack"

"People often mistake me for him"

"I'm so sure! That must happen ten times a day!"

As Steve put the movie in he notice Kathy had also brought a bottle of white wine. Looking at it, he said, "Shall I pour." "Of course, my dear", she replied. Settling in for the evening, they enjoyed the privacy for the first time in weeks.

In room 212, Ryan, Matthew and Luke were on level three of *Secret Missions of D-Day*. While in room, 214 several of the girls had gathered to help each other with their hair. Wes and Blanca were sitting outside in lawn chairs looking at the night sky talking about assorted topics, While Mark and Marci were making up for lost time in the love department. It was a secure feeling for a moment in a world of absolute uncertainty.

At 5:00, Weston decided that the pile of pillows that formed his bed was no longer to his liking, jumped on the foot of the bed. This woke Kathy and she petted him, then turning her attention to Steve, she thought he could sleep no matter what. Snuggling up to him and trying for at least one more hour of sack time before the day began.

By 6:30 things were stirring, Dana and Karen had started working in the diner when Marci came in. "just look at how those men cleaned!" she exclaimed. "They just pitched the whole lot out the window except for the pots and pans." Kathy and Blanca arrived just in time to hear her. "What I wouldn't give for some fresh eggs", Blanca said as they surveyed the food supply. "Or a glass of real milk", added Karen. "Looks like oatmeal, pancakes, dry cereal with powdered milk, canned juice and coffee is the best

menu I can come up with”, said Dana. As they began to work about, others moved into the morning chores. Mike was adding fuel to the generator while Mark and Jeff were making plans to work the rail yard.

The now famous signal to eat sounded, and the small diner filled again. After breakfast, the meeting was held with each person providing input on how the task of the day could be accomplished. First Alan was going to locate a piece of equipment to clear the streets of debris. His plan was to move the main routes designated by Wes and Steve. With the aid of other drivers on smaller tractors while he operated a large loader, the streets could be cleared by the time trucks were loaded and ready to roll. Jeff had become proficient operating the locomotive and was going to build the train as Mark sorted cars from the yard. Under their supervision, several of the students were going to line switches for them. Robert planned to load cars on the platform as Jeff backed them into location. Alan and Marshall had operated semi-trucks before and therefore could shuttle supplies from the warehouses. This operation became necessary because the buildings did not have rail access. The first building was “*Howard Brothers Wholesale Supply*” a food brokering company. Tami and Blanca were walking down each aisle marking pallets for the loading crew to put on trucks. The order of the selection was in a uniform manor. First, they selected loads of flour and cornmeal. After a full carload of this was taken they moved to the next item. At the rail yard, Kathy was using her organization skills. The last four numbers of each boxcar recorded with the contents. Car# 2391 one-half load flour, one half load cornmeal, Car# 9918 full load of sugar. She was keeping track of how much was going into stock and where it was located. I don’t want to open cars until we find what we need she said as the next car was moved into position

Many of the young people were driving forklifts although they could not load with the proficiency of true dockworkers they did manage to fill the trucks. Marshall had also come up with the idea of having several drivers use *U-Haul* trucks from a nearby rental

place to carry loads as well. He remarked that the trucks were automatic transmission and simple to operate. After all, he said they are designed for the average person to move with and the trip was only three miles in each direction. Marci had moved to a section of the warehouse the supplied paper products and toiletries. She had marked for loading an entire carload of toilet paper. "I might do without a lot of things", she joked "but this isn't going to be one of them." She also had loads of every type of hygiene product could be found on the shelves of a store. One item that crossed her mind was condoms, without a pharmacy to dispense birth control pills this was the only form of birth control that was readily available. Between toothpaste, deodorant, razor blades and soap plus all the other add extras Marci had compiled a solid carload of items. The freight continued to roll at a steady pace.

With a pause for a midday meal, the plans reviewed. Now with plenty of food to carry them for a while, the next item was water supply. An address in the phonebook listed a bottle water supply warehouse one block away. With that item covered. Wes made a suggestion to check as many building a possible in the surrounding area. "It is my idea that many companies would like to maintain a low profile about what they handle to avoid theft or public protest." Steve agreed by looking at the phonebook and saying "I see what you mean, here is *R.A. Johnson Manufacturing CO.* next door but no listing of what they make. It could be something useful". It was decided that the two of them would check out all of the buildings in a four-block area to determine if any additional supplies could be found. The truck crews continued hauling and the loaders now more experienced could keep the trucks full in short order. The first buildings checked out by Wes and Steve were a metal fabrication warehouse followed by a cardboard box company. However, when they entered *Weston Supply Co.* Wes announced that they had struck gold. This was the type of place, which he had mentioned. It was nondescript by name, this would not draw attention to it's self. The business was a medical supply company. Walking down the aisles Wes began to pull

boxes from the shelf for pick up by the loading crew. "This place has everything but the medicines that we need. I guess a trip to a hospital pharmacy is still needed. I dread that because of the smell and decay involved, but it needs to be done." Leaving this location, the next few places did not yield any material of value.

As the building searches took place, cargo loading was at a fever pitch. Trucks now ran in a constant convoy to and from the rail yard. The drivers had realized that they had no stoplights or speed limits, and it did not matter if they dented or dinged the trucks because in a few hours the life of the truck would be over.

Mark had discovered four more *Amtrak* cars sitting in front of the repair facility after checking them over he determined they could be added to the train. As Jeff worked, the cars during the loading portion Mark had moved through the yard building the complete train by adding cars from the various tacks as well as the ones dropped by Jeff. The train was now about twenty-five cars full of assorted cargo ranging from fuel and supplies to passenger cars.

Sister Carol had taken up a position at a nearby gas station, her job was to work a hand pump taken from a boat supply store. The pump's original purpose was to pump bilge water or emergency bailing of boats. By adding a piece of PVC pipe to it, Alan made it possible to reach the gasoline in the tanks by opening the truck fill cap in the parking lot. She kept the trucks supplied with gas or diesel as needed. Other people were assigned various tasks to keep the supplies moving. Once Alan had cleaned the streets for the truck traffic he took his helpers and began towing construction equipment to the rail yard to be loaded.

With evening approaching the supply, operation ceased for the day. The group now returned to the motel for hot showers and hot food, something they cherished after weeks without. Once again, the diner sprang to life as a weary cooking crew moved into the kitchen. This time Sister Carol stepped in and told the group that she and the students would cook tonight. As they began preparation of the meal, the remainder of

the people separated into small groups. Steve, Wes, Mark and Mike sat in a large round booth in the corner with a city map planning details for tomorrow. Mike had recommended they go to the National Guard Armory first to check out any usable equipment. Wes also reminded that a trip to a Hospital pharmacy was still needed.” Why a hospital as opposed to a regular drugstore”, asks Mark? “The hospital will have emergency drugs and IV’s plus a larger supply of things a local store sells to little of to maintain a large inventory. A single truck can carry the full complement of supplies, we must be certain that it goes in an easy access location. I can do it with a couple of the students to help carry and stack the boxes”, Wes replied. “What else should go to the top of the list”, Steve questioned. “Here comes Kathy and Blanca let’s put the question to them.” The women entered with a bottle of white wine in each hand and went directly to the corner booth. “Here” Kathy said, “open this and we will toast a successful day.” With Mike pulling on the corks, Mark broke the news about finding the passenger cars. The women were delighted to hear this.” It has been getting a little crowded back there”, Blanca said as she picked up her glass.” We are making a list for tomorrow”, Steve interjected between swallows of chardonnay, “give us some input.” “More gas cylinders for the grills, we only have a few”, left offered Blanca.” We may want to stock clothing and blankets suggested”, Kathy” our original supply was for us before we started adding to the group and we have more than doubled in size.” Tami and Jeff entered and moved to the back to join in on things.” We have been compiling a list to continue tomorrow any input would be welcome”, said Mark handing the legal pad to Tami. As she scanned the list, Robert with his wife, Marsha entered the diner moving, toward the rear, he spoke” private party or can the newbie’s join”. “After a days work like the two if you put in don’t call yourself newbie’s”, Mike replied.

“Well Kathy supper is ready”, Sister Carol announced, “do you want to do the call to come and get it”. “It’s all right with me if you want to” Kathy answered. With that, Sara a blond sixteen year old, who had been making a large pot of macaroni and

cheese went to the door and beat the sound while yelling, "Come and get it". In mere moments, the room was full of hungry folks. The meal was a full spread down to more homemade bread. Mark could not pass up the opening, commented how he could tell Marci had not been in the kitchen because everything was great and the smoke alarm had not gone off. Marci put her hands on her hips as a biscuit went sailing past his head. Full of food and exhausted from a hard day's work, most people called it an early night. The young girls had stocked a box with health and beauty items from the store. They decided tonight

was the night to do something about their hair. Two adjoining rooms became a styling salon as they washed, cut and styled until late in the evening. This was a real treat for them because it was the first time in weeks they had unlimited hot water and supplies. Most of the boys were in two other rooms fully involved in an X-Box marathon, while the rest of the older set retired to their rooms for a movie and sleep.

With the new day came the standard breakfast of oatmeal, dry cereal with powdered milk, pancakes and coffee or juice. "What I wouldn't give for some ham and eggs", muttered Robert as he stared into his plate. "Well I haven't seen a chicken or pig along the way have you" Marsha posed. As the meal was in its finishing stage the topic of the days, jobs were discussed. Jeff and Mark were returning to the yard with plans to complete the train. A large team was heading to the near by *Target* and *Macy's* store to gather all of the clothing and bedding they could find. Alan's group had located a propane gas facility and had planned to bring all of the tanks that could be loaded onto trucks to the yard where a gondola car was fitted to carry them. Steve, Robert, Marshall and Mike were off to check out the armory for anything that might be of service. Wes was taking a truck with a small group to the hospital for pharmacy and medical supplies. It looks like a full day again Steve commented as they studied the city map. "I worry about us being spread so far apart." Marshall suggested that each group be armed with one of the flare guns taken from the boating store when they were

making the pump for refueling the trucks. He went on to explain the flares are made to fire in the air out at sea and could be seen for miles. "If you shoot one we will, all come running from every direction. As long as we remain armed, each group could put up a fight until help arrives." "Great plan", someone said and it was decided that the signal would be used only in a true emergency. It was also a good time to remind everyone about firearm safety and not just shooting for the fun of it. Because Marshall went on to say, "The sound of a shot carries a long way and you never know who can hear it."

As Kathy climbed into the truck heading for the rail yard she told Steve that Weston had been very nervous this morning and to be careful because she trusted animals ability to detect trouble. As he closed her door, he promised that he would be and they should be leaving town soon. Watching the truck pull away, he thought about how her intuition was often, more right than wrong.

Pulling into the armory, the four men carefully checked for any signs of movement. After a search of the buildings, they concluded that part of the guard's equipment was missing. Robert arrived with the explanation. Looking at a duty board, he determined that half of the unit was on active duty. Mike in the meantime dashed in to report he had located the main storage vault for all of the equipment. With the aid of pioneer tools taken from two duce and a half, trucks plus a lot of hard work the door succumbed and they entered to find a vast amount of supplies. In the far corner Robert, located MRE's for single as well as the large squad and platoon sizes. He began to dance around like a small boy on Christmas morning. Look! He cried meat. He was pointing to boxes reading the names aloud. "Salisbury steak and Pork Chops too. We will eat meat tonight!" Further investigation found water purification tabs and filters. "These filters will be a great use for us", Steve said picking up a case and moving them to the door. Mike had been listening to the chatter, as his eyes searched the room. "This is what I have been looking for," as he hefted a radio to his shoulder. "If we transmit on it, our location could be given away but we can use it to monitor what is

going on.” Marshall was standing in the center of the room when he turned to Steve and said, “Let’s get a duce started and load up.” “Right! Let’s go!” Moving through the office and into the compound, the truck was backed to the loading door. Robert began stacking the food supplies of the rear of the truck; Marshall pushed a dolly loaded with clothing across the room. Mike had found the commutations section and was selecting antennas along with assorted equipment to take. Steve moved around the storage area thinking about how the guard was called out for all types of emergencies. In the back of his mind, he knew the guard was armed for civil unrest. “There must be a weapons vault”, he said aloud. In the far rear corner, he made the discovery. A steel door separated this room from the supply depot. This must be it he thought, because you would need entry to the supply room which was controlled and then into here. It was a form of double security. Calling the others over to examine it, they agreed. Using a torch hauled in from the repair department. The door opened in a few minutes. Inside was what they had hoped to find. Cases of M-16’s, four M-60’s and two M-2 .50cal machineguns, the room was also stacked with crates of ammo as well as M-18 smoke grenades. However, no fragmentation types were found. “Let’s take it all, because when we get to *Biltmore* we can establish a very good defense. I don’t want to go through another Hooverville again; I want us to have every advantage we can get.” The .50cal’s did not have tripods; it appeared they were for vehicle mounts. “Well”, Marshall said, “we can improvise, here is the most important part.” When the loading was complete, two deuces and the truck they came in were loaded to the maximum. Robert had even found medical equipment that he hoped would help Wes’s needs. Pulling away the four men felt exhausted from the amount of work required to load the whole lot but they knew today’s find could give them the protection needed in the world of uncertainty they now lived in.

Back at the train, supplies were pouring in at a rapid rate. Jeff was shuttling cars on a constant basis and Kathy was struggling to keep pace which car had what in

it. By appearances, the entire group was in high gear working at a frantic pace to complete the resupply operation. On the loading platform Alan had towed several power generators and fuel trucks in addition three large air compressors and to complete the inventory six of the portable spotlight units used by workers for night construction jobs. Mark was searching for flatcars to handle this load when he saw the National Guard trucks pull up. Waving at Steve he hollered, "Give me a hand when you can." The four men had made a plan during the return to the yard. We should leave the clothing and blankets in the truck for storage, the weapons would be stored with the exception of one .50cal and two M60's. One M60 would ride in the scout truck and the other in the front locomotive. It was discussed to take a gondola with reinforced sandbag sides and mount the .50 using heavy timbers for support. The plan was presented to Alan his contractor mind went into the design stage. He gathered up the crew that had been working with him taking them to *Home Depot* as fast as they could travel.

As Steve went to help Mark with the scavenger hunt for cars, the trio began removing the needed equipment. Parking the trucks on the platform along with the mountain of waiting gear, they admired how hard the people were working." I can't get over how a group of people that just assembled gets along so well and works so hard," Robert pointed out. "You are right", Marshall agreed, "I'm glad we were able to be part of this group. I have a feeling in other places there are power struggles and civil unrest." Mike looked down the track and spoke in a low tone. "The thing I wonder is who is left and how all of this is going to be resolved." Robert spoke in reply; "I would like the answer to that myself. As we were traveling by road trying to meet up with all of you, we passed some ugly sights along the highway. I don't believe it was all from the war. Some of it appeared too recent." Marshall lit a small cigar and as he rolled it between his fingers, he spoke. "I have a feeling there will be more Hooverville's in our future. No telling when actual law and order will come back. Hell there is no telling who

won the war. All we can get for information is the broadcast from the President telling us that everything is all right.” Mike added to it saying, “I have a feeling those broadcast are prerecorded because they all say the same thing and don’t give any real information about what is going on in the world.” The other two men looked at him and spoke at the same time. “You know, you are right.”

With Steve and Mark, switching cars while Jeff shuttled the full ones to a sidetrack things were moving at a good pace. In the yard now were six of the young people each at a switch ready to line it on command. Mark had moved the cut of *Amtrak* cars to a location near the platform in preparation for loading. Alan had brought several trucks loaded with propane tanks. These placed in a series of gons and flats pushed into the far section of the mainline. However, with the recent influx of material this portion of the loading process had to be placed on hold. Kathy waived to Jeff and he pulled five recent loaded cars away. “Who would have ever thought it”, Mark said slapping Steve on the shoulder as they walked across to the next track.

“Here we have a Chaplin and an Accountant working as a Switcher and Yardmaster.”

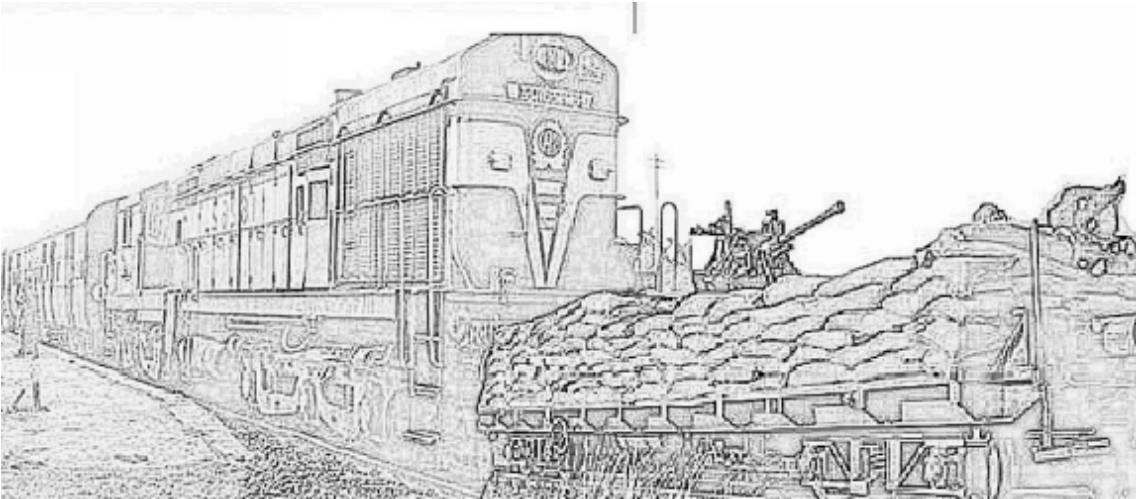
“Well you got me there; it takes years of seniority to make those positions.”

“Yep! I think I will put in for retirement”

“Me too”

Alan returned with the building supplies backing the truck next to the gon for conversion as the front gun car. From the back of the truck came sheets of plywood followed by 2x10 lumber he also had the truck loaded with bags of sand, concrete, bundles of shingles and any other dense material that could be used for protection. The small generator and air compressor came to life followed by the steady tap of an air nailer. One of the boys helping was using a forklift move material from the truck to be stacked as a makeshift bunker two others were inside building walls. In about an hour, the front part of the car had the appearance of a rolling fort. Inside they had

constructed a mount for the .50cal plus firing ports on both sides to support small arms. The rear section provided a place for a crew of four to ride out of the wind and eat. Ammo and weapon storage made possible by 2x10's placed across sandbags at the midheight of the car. Two layers of landscape timbers covered the top. The back portion of the gon left open to serve as an observation post. All we need now is a few yard chairs and a table to give it a homey touch Alan said as he climbed from the finished project.



Steve extended him a hand pulling him on to the platform. "The true contractor genius comes through again," he said.

By now, it was near noon and each team was returning for lunch and report on their progress. A strange mix of vehicles surrounded the diner. At first glance, it appeared to be a truck stop. U-Hauls, flatbed semi's, several pickups and the ubiquitous railroad truck circled like covered wagons in a western movie. All of them loaded to maximum capacity and each with cargo for transfer at the rail depot. Lunch was a simple meal of sandwiches and canned fruit. The conversation inside was fast paced about what had been completed and was left to do. By all reports, the gathering of supplies would be completed soon leaving only the loading of the train. Robert made the announcement of the food found at the Amory. We can have Salisbury Steak, Pork Chops and Chicken tonight courtesy of the U.S. Army. This news brought a rousing

applause from everyone. Even Weston who had been sleeping at Kathy's feet perked up.

The trucks converged to disgorge their loads at the depot. It was the first time many of the people had been near the train in days. Looking upon it several remarked how much it had grown from the first time they boarded it. With the entire group, working at the station things went quickly, as car after car pulled in to receive its freight. Alan had taken the boom truck and started the loading process for all of the propane tanks. He told everyone that they removed the large residential sizes as well as the small grill types from a gas company at the edge of town. The other small ones picked up at various corner marts where people switched their empty ones for full tanks. It took three gons and two flats to handle the new gas supply.

"These babies are going to ride on the rear", Mark said as Jeff pulled the cut of cars out. Jeff asked about the quantity of gasoline and diesel tank cars in addition to the now loaded propane.

"Do you think it is safe for me to continue to drive with all of this on board?"

"Well I will get things rolling and you can switch place with me. But, when we get to the mountains, it will be a whole different ballgame."

"How much harder is it?"

"First, you have to remember that the cars have slack between them. This means they can run in and out on the next one. So, when you are going uphill the train stretches out because the weight is pulling downhill. But, when you start down, the slack runs in causing the cars to bunch up and push you faster than you want to go. This is a major cause of derailments. The real headache is when the train is half over the mountain part of the train is pushing and part is pulling. That is when you can break a knuckle causing the train to break in half."

"What then?"

"Let's don't even talk about that. Just pray, it won't happen."

A team started working with Alan on modifying the passenger cars to make them more adaptable for the up coming trip. The air wrench was hard at work and seats tossed from the cars. Another team had taken two trucks back into town for furnishing to outfit the recent additions to the *custom liner* as it was now called. Food and water were being stacked in the galley car. "It is a shame were can't find a real kitchen and dining car", Mark said to Steve as he handed him a box full of canned food. "I am thankful we have found this he answered back could you imagine this trip in boxes?"

"By now ole buddy they would have beat us with sticks."

"Yep! I believe you're right."

As the supply trucks were emptied and parked, the three forklifts headed for the new propane tanks. This gave everyone a well-deserved break. Moving across the platform Steve spoke with Kathy. "Do you still have that jumpy feeling?"

"I still feel uneasy, like we are being watched. But Weston has relaxed, look at that."

Steve glanced at the retriever who had found a spot under a bench.

"Looks like he has no worries to me."

"At first, he paced up and down the dock with me. Now he is just a watchdog."

"Watchdog?"

"Sure, he watches me go here and watches me go there."

"You ain't normal, you know that?"

"Couldn't be, look how many years we have been together."

"We should be finished soon except for the construction equipment and Army trucks."

"Great! My body aches and I could use a hot bath."

"Don't get too used to them, after tomorrow it could be awhile before the next one."

A kiss was exchanged and it was back to work for the both of them. As Steve walked, back to the end of the dock Mark met him halfway.

"What do you say we send the bulk of the people back to the motel?"

"Sounds good to me. A few of us can load the big stuff."

"That's what I was thinking."

"You know what else we should do."

"I'm all ears"

"We need to test fire the .50cal. to be sure the mount works and find out how to operate it."

"Yep! And besides it would be fun."

"Yep! It would. A little M60 trigger time would be good also."

"Oh! Don't lie to me! You just want to shoot some shit up like a little boy with a new toy."

"You, know me too well ole buddy."

"Well! Let's do it."

As the two of them walked over to the main body of people, Mark said, "we have a little work left to do but a few of us can handle it if the rest of you would like to call it a day." "Sounds good to me", Tami spoke up "my feet are killing me and I could use a hot bath. Sister Carol, Maria and Karen have taken the pickup and started to work on dinner", she added. Many of the group was getting to their feet when Mark added, "if you hear a shooting don't be alarmed we are going to try out the gun mount on the front car." Several of the people left and others remained to see the gun in action. As they placed, it on the new mount Mike got out the TM's and FM's he had taken from the Guard store room. Boxes of ammo were brought out and Steve asks the question, "Does anyone know much about this gun." Robert stepped forward and announced that his father had owned an army surplus store in Midland for about thirty years. "I got to play with all kinds of stuff, including demilled weapons of all types."

"Then jump right in here"

While Mike read from the TM, Robert opened the ammo can and loaded a belt. He then went through the steps of placing the belt, pulling the charging handle.

"Ready" he asks.

“Ready”, everyone nodded.

He pressed down on the butterfly trigger causing the weapon to fire. The sound was incredible and the car in the parking lot began to lose bits and pieces at once. “I hope the owner was insured”, he grinned after releasing the trigger. “The most important thing”, he explained “was not to simply press and hold the machinegun wide open. You must learn to shoot in burst or the barrel will get too hot and ruin the weapon.” A line formed with each person taking a turn loading and firing. At the end of the session, several cars and a few distant street signs were no longer intact. Robert went on to cover the sighting and range of the .50. “Walk it to your target if need be”, he instructed, “You will be able to see where the rounds are hitting.” Next came the M60 with the same manner of instruction. Most people found it to be heavy but manageable. Wes and Ryan seemed to be old veterans with it. “How about tomorrow we put Wes with one in the advance truck and Ryan in the lead engine with the other”, Steve offered. Heads nodded in agreement. “The gun car is not going to be a smooth ride so how should we man it.” “Well” Marshall suggested, “We could work in three-hour shifts.” Heads nodded again so it was decided to call it an evening.

With the group heading in to clean up for the evening meal a discussion about tomorrow’s departure began. “What do we need to do before we pull out?” Robert asks.

“Well we need to fill the engines with fuel and sand”

“Check all of the cargo tie downs”

“Make the final connections on the air brakes and install the ET device”

“While all of that is taking place the scout truck is going to make a few miles in advance,” Steve offered.

“Go ahead,” Mark said “we can get underway while you get things lined up. But remember we have about three times the cars now than when we started so if something goes wrong it will take us a little longer to get to you.”

After what would be, their last hot shower for a while Steve and Kathy walked to the diner. They were the last to arrive and a little ribbing was in order. Jeff teased as they sat down, "that Robert could not wait any longer for his Salisbury Steak and only gave you two more minutes before he was going to start without you." Robert answered back: "I noticed you circling the chicken pan like it was going to fly away." The mode was light tonight, partly due to all of the hard work accomplished in the last few days and the journey about to start.

"This ain't bad for Army food", quipped Blanca as she took a bite.

"We had to doctor it up a lot", answered Maria

"If not it probably would have tasted like Marci's cooking," Mark came back. Another biscuit came at his head as she put her hands on her hips. "One of these days buster" as she shook her fist at him.

"Yep! One of these days I won't duck in time and then you be charged with assault with a deadly biscuit."

As the meal, concluded plans were made for the departure in the morning. Wes, Steve and Marshall had set 6:00 for their time to pull out. The train was going for a 7:00 out time. The plan called for the consist to be serviced as last items on the checklist were cleared. The questions were brought up for discussion. What about this place, Should we try to make it appear no one had been here or just leave it as is? After some suggestions offered, it was decided to leave it as is. Next topic brought up was one that each person had been thinking of but did not ask. When do you think we will get there? "I don't know", Steve, answered, "if we can stay on a good course without many blocked tracks and having to double back to miss cities or bad bridges a few weeks at the outside." Several bottles of wine were opened and the talk turned to questions about things in general. Mike had put the question out for discussion. "Has anyone seen any planes or anything at all fly over?" No one had. "Furthermore, I can't

even recall seeing a bird”, Blanca said. Actually, Weston is the only animal noticed by anyone; even those that had recently join the group.

Sleep did not come easy to many that night. Anxiety lay heavy on the minds of weary travelers as they pondered what lay in store for them. Kathy was speaking softly to Steve as they each tried to find sleep.

“Do you think it is going to work?”

“What part of it are you talking about?”

“The part where we get there and establish a new community.”

“Well we certainly have a lot riding on it, don’t we?”

“Does it make you nervous that so many people are following our idea?”

“Yes, I think of that often.”

“Me too.”

“Well what would they be doing if they weren’t here?”

“I don’t know but the chances of surviving are better in numbers. We couldn’t do all of this alone.”

“It wouldn’t be easy.”

“Do you ever think about Paul and how he is doing?”

“Yes, I do every time we put the maps and markers out for him. I hope he is following behind with good news.”

“What do you think his chances are for making it here?”

“Slim, but he may have decided to go on to Mexico with his two traveling companions.”

“We were lucky that no one was hurt in that Hooverville mess.”

“Yes, we were and I fear more of that is to come.”

She snuggled into him and said, “Don’t let anything happen to you.”

“I promise and you do the same.”

The next morning as they loaded the truck Steve could see the entire action-taking place. Each person working to get underway as the checklist was nearing completion. Jeff was backing the consist into the side yard for sand and fuel. The flatcar and the gun car pushed to the front section of the yard limits to allow the rest of the train room to maneuver. Robert and Alan along with two of the younger boys were taking the first turn riding shotgun. Ryan had put the M60 in the front engine along with two cans of ammo. As he lashed it into place next to the other weapons in the cab, he told his dad "I hope we don't need this but I'm glad to have it." "Me too" Jeff answered.

The truck pulled away with Marshall driving as the maps came out along with the field glasses. "Well we have had as short break" Wes said, "time to start earning our money."

"You know it funny to hear that", Marshall said as he accelerated.

"What?"

"Earn money; think of the thousands of dollars we have walked by in the stores plus the banks but no one even gives it a second thought."

"You know, you're right we could burn millions in a stove to keep warm with and it would be nothing."

"Yep, you're right."

CHAPTER 7

As they moved at about thirty miles, an hour Steve calculated the next place to pass through was Goshen. "It is about ten track miles", he reported "and according to the atlas, it has a population of three thousand."

"I guess the usual plan for checking it out" Steve asks.

"It has worked so far" Wes answered.

As they moved in on it, there was not much to see. By all appearances, the town had dried up long before the war. Wes gave the mile marker and stopping signal to the train. As Steve dismounted, he noticed movement to his right. Swinging the CAR-15 toward the movement, he yelled a warning. The others followed suit with now three weapons covering the area. The tall grass moved again this time it was followed by a whimper. Stepping toward the sound with his rifle at the ready, he was surprised at his discovery. It was a Black Lab and by the looks of it, it had been a long time between meals. The dog showed signs of malnutrition. Lowering his weapon, he sat down beside it, as it showed no signs of aggression. Reaching out to pet it, he called up to the truck and told them what he had found. As he lead the dog up the embankment, Wes had already opened one of the lunch coolers pulling out food for the near starved animal. The three men squatted and watched as a whole can of *Spam* and four homemade biscuits disappeared in short order. Marshall opened a bottle of water and poured it into a small bucket from the cargo cabinet, this to downed in haste. As they lifted the big dog into the backseat of the truck

Steve asks the question" two dogs in about a ten-mile radius and that is all. How can it be?"

Lifting his ball cap Wes responded. "No other living thing. Nothing at all". The Lab had spread himself out in the backseat taking up most of it. "Now look sport!" Wes said, "You gotta give me room too! It is crowded enough in here with this machinegun and the .50cal and the sniper rifle plus all this ammo so you better move over".

The men rearranged the equipment by placing the two rifles on a side compartment and moving two small coolers to the front seat. However, the dog now very comfortable in his new surrounding was not giving up much room.

"I don't know what your name is but it ort to be Sasquatch, Look at those feet would you."

The two men glanced in the cab and Marshall said, "those feet are almost as big as mine."

"All right, now", Steve posed "which one of you is going to take him I've already got one"

"Do you want him", Wes asks.

"I've got three kids to make me crazy, but if you don't I'll take him."

"I would like to have him and I know Blanca loves dogs. She misses Tessa now and it's been two years since we lost her."

"OK by me"

Wes looked at the Lab and said, "Well you don't have a collar or name tag so I guess your new name is Sasquatch."

"Well I still need to give this place a once over", Steve suggested as he went into the remains of Goshen. The town had more boarded up buildings than active ones. After about twenty minuets of looking around, he gave thumbs up as he walked back to the truck. Inside he found the dog polishing off a can of Vienna Sausages and more water. Marshall radioed the all clear and they moved out.

As they rode along the discussion was continuing on why they found two dogs but nothing else with any signs of life. In the town were a few bodies lying about, but no signs that anyone had passes though.

"I guess the dog belonged to who ever lived there", Steve commented.

"But look at this area", Wes said, "it doesn't show any signs of a direct hit and the ground is only burned in a few places."

"Not at all like Weston", Marshall added. They talked for another few miles as the lab slept in the backseat.

Back on the train, Mark was working with Jeff on controlling the train now that the load had grown to be twenty-six cars instead of the seven they had started with. "Remember", Mark was saying, "you have the dynamic brake plus the engine brake in addition to the air brake. Each one has a special function but you can use them all if needed." Jeff had operated the train most of the trip under Mark's guidance but this was the first time he noticed things like the slosh of the liquid in the tank cars or the need to change notches on the throttle more often. "When we hit the mountains, it is really going to be a pain in the ass", Mark told him.

Ryan had been keeping a close watch from the seat behind the conductor's chair. He spoke as the train was covering a large section of straight track. "It seems awkward to be ridding along with this machinegun at my side knowing that I may use it to shoot people."

His father looked across the cab at him and said, "Son you did what had to be done back there"

"I know but this is the real thing not a video game."

"That's true but think of what would have happened if we didn't step in. those young boy students would all be dead now along with Sister Carol and the girls would probably be living a fate worse than death."

"I guess you are right"

"**I know I'm right!** Besides that, you know you're uncle Steve was not going to let them die if he could help it, and you sure got him out of a tight jam."

Mark spoke up, "If you don't mind a little input from me I would like to add something"

"Go ahead," Ryan, said

"Well Ryan young men and women have been answering the call to defend this country and freedom from the very start. Many of them about the same age as you died in the process. But they did it knowing that it had to be done. They didn't want to

do it anymore than you did what you had to do back there. If we don't stand and fight for what is right then the world will be ruled by people like those in Hooverville. You shot a few but you saved many. If we hadn't stopped them the next group and the next and the next would have fallen to them. No telling how many, you did a good job back there, I am proud of you for stepping in, and doing what was right. It can be a heavy burden to carry sometimes but remember as we speak there are groups fighting a war we didn't want. Yes, it wasn't a video game but it was the cost of doing what was right."

"Well said" added Jeff

Ryan looked at the both of them and said, "You're right I am the same age as the troops who are serving in the military."

A few cars back Kathy was pasting several photographs into her journal when Marci came to sit beside her. "That's a good idea", she said.

"Well I have been keeping a record of things from the time we were in the schoolhouse."

"I should do that."

"I think maybe someday we can look back on it to see how far we came and it will be a reminder for future generations."

"Would you mind showing it to me?"

"Not at all. Here are pictures I have taken with the digital camera and printed on the computer. This one is the schoolhouse and here is one of all of us in front of the train before we left Arlington."

"That seems like such a long time ago"

"Well we have been through a lot in the last several weeks"

"It feels like before this it was another lifetime."

"I know"

"Here are pictures of us when we made the stop in Lindsey. This one has all of us in front of the depot. And it shows the name of the town on the sign. This one is a

group shot of the people who stayed behind.”

“I wonder how they are doing.”

“I would bet they are a lot better off because we stopped and helped.”

“I bet you’re right on that.”

“This group I took after the shootout in Hooverville.”

“That was really bad”

“Yes it was but if you look at this picture you can see all of the lives saved.” She said pulling out the photo of Sister Carol and the students.

“And these are from Weston”

“Oh! Look, the motel and diner”

“And here is one of Weston after the girls gave him a good scrubbing. The picture was of him sitting by his food dish.”

“Look at this”, Marci said pointing to the photo of the train as it was loaded.

“Last but not least he we are in front of the Weston station.”

“Wow! Look at the difference in the size of our group.”

“Yep, and so far we have all gotten along fairly well.”

Up the track, a few miles the trio had ran into a stalled train.

“Well this one is going to be a hard one”, Steve said as they dismounted the truck.

“Harder than the others,” Marshall asks.

“For one thing, the train has to put in at a siding two miles back so it will be a long distance to move the cars. Another is the terrain is flat so the cars won’t roll well.”

Wes had placed the M60 in the truck with Sasquatch, whose head was out the window watching every move. As he walked forward, he slung a rifle over a shoulder.

“How long do you think this ones going to take he questioned?”

“This one is going to be a mess. First, we need to get the lead engine up here to pull the cars back because they just aren’t going to roll well.”

Wes offered to radio the train and move the truck while the others checked the train. It was about fifty yards back to the nearest crossing where the truck could leave the track. During this process Jeff broke the lead engine from the consist. Mark had worked out a plan with him on how to do this.

“First, you pull the cars by the siding and I will pull on to the main line in the second engine and follow you. Then when we get to the other end, I will hook on and you release the cars. Next someone will need to stay at the switch all of the time to open and close it. They can open the siding and let you in. I will push the cars by and turn them loose with a little bump to send them as far down the main line as I can, back up and let you out. Then up to the front of the siding, I back in and you go on for more cars.”

“Wow that is a lot of switching.”

“That is the way it is done a thousand times a day on the railroad. It’s slow but it’s the only way.”

As Jeff went forward to make his first hook up Mark and Ryan broke the MU cables from the second engine and went to the cars to advise everyone and get two volunteers for switch detail. Luke and a student named Shane jumped at the chance to get off the train and work a little. Mark cautioned them not to move anything until he motioned to them. Meanwhile Jeff had arrived at the front. As Steve entered the engine compartment Jeff advised him on the plan at the rear. “Great job, I know it is going to be hard to judge distance with the flat and gun car in front so watch me for the signal.” Next, he went out front and warned the crew that it was going to be very bumpy during connection and disconnection so they should find a good place to sit and hold on. The train crew now noticed Sasquatch as he walked in circles around Wes. “We will explain later”, he shouted when questioned about him. Jeff guided the train forward watching

for Steve's signal. When the knuckles locked, Steve made the air connection and stepped back to motion to Marshall to cut the first group from the train. Pulling back, Jeff headed off with a cut of fifteen cars. The first six were empty tank cars followed by four bulkhead flats the last five heavy loaded grain hoppers. As he pulled away, Wes walked over and said, "He's getting good at that." "Yes, he is and to think a few weeks ago he had never been in the cab much less touched the controls." As the first cut passed by the train Robert who was manning the 50cal and Joey his student loader waived to the people in the passenger cars. Joey stood up and beat his chest like Tarzan. He was showing off for Christa a girl he had a crush on from the eighth grade. "If you fall off and bust your ass, she is going to laugh at you", Robert kidded. Alan and Mike were sitting in the lower part of the cars when it went by. Mike was a student also and was learning from Alan how to load the extra magazines for the AR-15 he was carrying. Mark followed by to complete the change at the end. When they made the return trip, Marci and Karen stood by the track and handed up coolers of drinks and snacks for them. The next cut of cars was about thirty in number, with everything from mining equipment on flats to loads of coal. It took six round trips to clear the entire train. The final trip had a surprise for Blanca. It was Sasquatch on his way to meet the rest of the group. With the connections made, the train was back on the main line. Jeff radioed the truck and they set out again.

On board the train Blanca, not knowing that Wes had feed the big lab opened some dog food that Kathy had stacked up for Weston. The lab was eating his third meal of the day, which was in all likely the most he had eaten in a week. The two dogs looked at each other and sniffed around finally deciding they would be friends. Again, the girls took charge brushing and cleaning until the black dog looked like a happy camper. Kathy documented this with a couple of pictures and noting the location of the newest member of the troupe.

CHAPTER 8

The delay in Goshen plus clearing the track had reduced the distance planned. In an effort to make up for the lost time the truck crew had sped up and was moving at a faster pace than previously planned. As they rounded, a curve the sound of a shot rang out and the two passengers in front could see a chunk of ballast flip into the air. Marshall jammed on the brake and brought the truck to a stop as a second round hit closer to them. The doors flew open with the three men piling out on the passenger side. More fire was coming in their direction and the accuracy was getting better. Marshall scrambled to get the two rifles from the cargo compartment as Steve open fire with his CAR-15.

Wes could not find a target and did not want to give away the fact that they had a machinegun. Five more shots cracked with three hitting the front of the truck Wes wormed his way inside the cab and warned the train that they were under fire. Next, he switched on the PA speaker and began to speak. "Hold your fire! Hold your Fire!" When the firing had stopped, he spoke again. "We mean you no harm we are just passing through on the railroad." Silence. Wes spoke again, "we mean you no harm we are just passing through on the railroad." A yellow school bus rolled from a small thicket blocking the track. "Well were screwed now", Steve said as he looked at the roadblock. From behind the bus, a man appeared standing in the center of the track as though he owned the world. He yelled back "you have entered our area uninvited. We require secrecy and security." As he spoke, the men could see others moving for position. "They have us at their advantage", Wes said, "with the lake beside us we can't move in that direction, two hundred yards of open pasture to our left and they are going to have our rear covered in a few minutes." The voice continued, "If you leave you can

tell others and return in force to take our supplies, therefore you must die.” Wes answered back over the PA “we don’t need your supplies we can get whatever we want anywhere”.

“No good” came the answer “this is our area and you are not welcome”. He moved to the rear of the bus as the firing began. Wes slid lower into the cab switching the radio back to the train frequency. "Do not bring the train forward, I repeat do not bring the train forward, this is an ambush!" Steve fired at the bus in an effort to see what type of firepower they had. As Marshall opened the hard cases, he handed the 50cal to Steve and kept the sniper rifle for himself. Rounds were pinging closer and a few were hitting the truck. Water was pouring from several holes in the radiator. Steve was looking under the truck as he lay in the ballast, across the pasture he spotted two men take up position behind a downed log at the edge of the tree line he nudged Marshall and pointed. Wes had not opened fire with the M60 hoping for the element of surprise if they decided to rush. He commented that it sounded like single shot hunting rifles to him no one was putting down any rapid fire. He had worked his way to the front of the truck where he had steadied the weapon on its bipod. Marshall nudged Steve back pointing at the two men again. Steve took aim at the log and watched for the first opening. The firing was sporadic because either they were saving ammunition or they were planning something else and just wanted to keep the men in place.

One fellow raised and propped up on the log thinking he was unseen. Steve placed the crosshairs of the scope on him and squeezed the trigger. The sound of the 50cal roared like a cannon and the man disappeared from sight.

"Do you think I got him or did he duck", Steve asks Marshall" I couldn't see for the dust?"

“Oh! You got him all right his head exploded like a watermelon.”

“What about the other guy.”

"Well my guess is, he is still shitting his pants right now, but he will make a dash for a new place soon."

"Let's keep an eye out for him."

With this shot, firing picked up and the truck was taking several hits. Water poured from the radiator in addition to numinous hits in the engine compartment.

The truck was now useless for any hope of driving back down the track. The men noticed more movement in the wooded area at the end of the pasture. "Looks like they are going to flank us," Steve said. Wes was watching the action and commenting that they would make their move before dark to prevent us from escaping in the night.

"Well what should our plan be?"

"Do you think we should try to make it down by the lake and move to the rear?"

"Maybe, but if they catch us along the ballast we won't be able to move very fast and they could surround us easily."

As they devised a plan, in the distance the sound of a locomotive could be heard.

"If they come in here, it will be bad for them", Steve said. The train moved into sight and all eyes from both parties focused on it. The men in the woods began to fire on the front car. However, they were only hitting the flat car loaded with crossties now. As the first rounds opened up, the gun car returned with a devastating reply. Robert was working the M2 .50cal. in the front for all it was worth. His first burst raked the school bus from front to back. Dropping the muzzle slightly he sent a second line of fire across it. Pieces of window glass and small sections of sheet metal were airborne. As this was taking place, Ryan put a stream of fire into the wooded area beside the train causing limbs, brush and even small trees to disintegrate in a flurry of wood chips. The remainder of the gun cars occupants consternated their fire on the upper section of the pasture. No fire was returned as the ambushers ducked for any cover they could find. This was the diversion the truck crew needed. Steve opened the side compartment of the truck and removed three two-gallon gas cans. They had been stored to supply the

power generator but now they had a new use. Wes had opened up with the M60 causing the enemy to wonder where that came from and what could be next. His fire mixed with the gun car and Ryan firing from the locomotive was putting lead in the air at every point imaginable. Propping one gas can under the front wheel and two under the rear Steve lit six flares and tossed them into the trucks cab. Marshall had slung the sniper rifle over his shoulder and was operating his M16 as he dashed to the train catching onto the grab irons of the gun car. Jeff had pushed the train to within ten feet of the truck. Robert was firing with a deadly effect from here and Joey was feeding ammo at a frenzied pace. The 50cal. was a shredding machine causing several people to flee for shelter in what they thought would be a safer location. The fleeing would be gunmen looked like a covey of quail routed from their hiding place. Each dispatched in short order. Wes had now made his sprint to the front steps of the engine as quickly as a person could run carrying an M60 in ballast. Steve moved lastly providing covering fire for Wes. He now clung to the rear set of grab iron on the gun car. The flares now had the truck fully involved in flames and Jeff began to back the train out of the shooting gallery. Steve yelled to Robert to hit the gas cans if he could. The 50 sent a short burst under the truck rupturing the cans spilling the liquid and causing an instant explosion. With the train now in full reverse, the crew was no longer in Jeopardy. Jeff continued for another half mile before slowing down to let each person regroup. Complete evaluation reveled that Luke had received a slight wound to his left forearm as Wes examined it he remarked that it was probably a piece of shattered bullet that had hit the side of the car. Alan had a long gash down his right leg. It was not deep but bleed a lot, Wes wrapped it and told him that he would give him a tetanus shot on return to the train. Walking around the train Steve noticed numerous bullet holes and dents in the train cab. "Looks like it was getting pretty hot in here brother", he said to Jeff. "Well it was warm for a bit until your nephew opened up with that machinegun.

You should see the inside there must be an inch of shell casings on the floor. He really put down some fire on them."

Marshall had climbed into the gun car and was thanking each one of them for risking their lives to come after them. He had now sat down on a box and with a still trembling hand was trying to drink a bottle of water. In the front section of the car, Joey was scooping up empty brass using his helmet as a shovel. "Man Robert you were really ripping it off", the seventeen year old, said." Well I couldn't have done it without your loading". Both were now tossing brass over the side and it was still rolling around in the bottom of the car. Looking toward the rear of the car Robert tapped Joey on the shoulder and pointed. Empty .223 brass and magazines covered the entire floor of sandbags.

Jeff had radioed the train with the results of the operation and that they would rendezvous on the main line in a few moments. As they backed down the track toward the switch that would take them to the new rail line Steve sat in the cab with Jeff and Ryan." I am very thankful that you came after us he said" Jeff replied," There was no way we were just going to leave you".

"I know, but you could have been killed."

"That's OK we're family."

Mark had taken the train on to another line and was holding until the rescue operation had been completed. Jeff pulled to within sight of them and radioed to go ahead. Mark pulled off leading the way watching for a siding to change places. In the front engine were Donnie and Carl two students working to line any switches if needed. At mile marker 328.3 a switch was opened and Mark entered letting Jeff move to the front. As Jeff passed by, each person on the train was glued to the windows to see if their loved ones were all right. Jeff moved back to the front, the groups from each unit dismounted to see each other. Kathy was in the lead as she ran forward to check on Steve. He barely got to the ground before she had her arms around him with tears in

her eyes. "I'm all right," he said as he hugged her back. Dana and Blanca also had their men in a tight embrace. "Well do you think we should take a short pause to get reorganized" Mark asks. "We could", Steve, replied.

"What happened back there?"

"We were moving up the track when out of nowhere they hit us."

"No sign of warning"

"None according to the map and atlas the nearest town is two miles away"

"They just opened up with no warning."

"None at all, and they meant to kill us for fear we would raid them."

"Do you think it is a group like Lindsey?"

"I don't know, all we could see were small bands of people moving around us." "Only one person spoke and he said we were going to die to protect their secrecy."

"So how did it go?"

"We were goners until the gun car arrived. They had us trapped like rats and I am sure we wouldn't have made it out."

"Did the gun car work as planned?"

"You should have seen it, those guys were awesome. Those bastards didn't know whether to shit or wind their watches. Robert gave them hell with that 50 and all of the supporting fire was in every direction. They had nowhere to go without taking fire!"

"Glad it worked out like it did. A few minor injuries on our side, How about them?"

"I don't know for sure, but I seen at least a dozen go down. To tell the truth I was to busy running for the train I didn't see it all. We did lose the highrailer though. They put a lot of holes in the engine compartment, so I blew it up to keep it from falling into their hands"

"That explains the large column of black smoke we saw."

Kathy stepped in now and said "how about some lunch?"

"Great!" they walked back to the passenger cars.

The people had gathered on the ground outside of the kitchen car and the air was electric as several stories were told simultaneously. Joey was acting out for Christa how he was loading ammo for Robert. While Robert and Marsha were setting on a rock nearby grinning as they watched. Luke was showing all of the girls his battle wound and telling them how even though he was wounded he kept fighting. The truth was he did not know he was bleeding until after the fight. Alan was getting his leg redressed as he sat away from the crowd. Karen was trying not to show the fear that she had been holding back but her voice was giving her away. Wes and Blanca had found a tree and were sitting next to Marshall while Dana had rushed into the kitchen for him some food.

When things had died down, the decision for a new plan was made on scouting the track. With the highrailer gone it made moving into an area quietly impossible but walking would be too slow. It was the new plan to take the front engine to scout with until they found another vehicle. Even a 4x4 can be driven along the track and service road until a highrailer can be located.

"Yes," agreed Steve, "but it should be a civilian model because any type of military style could be interpreted as an aggressor." After the meeting concluded, Steve and Mark shuttled the gun car and the flat car to the second engine with the first now ready for scout duty. As they coupled the two cars to the second unit, it was observed how many hits the crossties had taken, "it looks like they peppered the front part but didn't do much to the sides" Mark said, as they looked it over more closely. "Well once the guys turned loose, with all of their firepower, it pretty much took the fight out of them and they went into cover mode."

CHAPTER 9

The engine now working, as a scout car was roomier but a trade off was the amount of noise. As compared to the highrailer, it was a pain to drive which meant

Steve had to work the controls while Marshall and Wes lined the switches. In addition, the extra equipment needed to break open the locks and defeat the electrical override on the controls had no compartments so it had to be stacked along the running board. "We need to find a replacement ASAP", Wes, said after his third trip down the front steps. "Well, according to the map we should be coming into Whitesburg in about five miles maybe we will have some luck there." Checking the atlas the town listed as a population of 35,000 so it was felt that something could be found as a substitute. "When we get close which of you is planning to check the location out," Steve asks. "I will go", Marshall, said "I feel better having Wes on the 50cal covering me."

Entering the area Marshall moved along the rail bank as he had watched many times. The town was burned to complete rubble in a large section with serious damage to the remaining portion. "I doubt we will find much here", he reported. As the engine moved into the yard, Steve began looking for the roundhouse. "Baby needs some fuel as well as sand soon", Steve told Wes. In the far section of the yard, he spotted it and Wes worked the switches to move the unit to the waiting tanks. With the go ahead Mark brought the train in continuing on to the roundhouse. "Any luck he asks", climbing down

"Don't know yet, haven't had much chance to give the place a once over." As with most stops people dismounted, to stretch their legs and see if there is anything that they may want. Marshall reported after a once over, the town had little to offer. Checking around the yard offices Mike located several maps plus switch keys but his best find of all was box filled with master keys to fit all of the equipment on site. The search for a highrailer turned up blank but the team did manage to find a suburban, used as a call car for the yard. "Let's try it out", Wes suggested. The equipment loaded and the engine reconnected with the consist the team moved out. As they pulled away from the yard the one thing that was in the back of each mind, how far until we stop for the night. Wes checked over the new maps looking for a town down the line plus a safe

haven to make evening camp when he announced that they would be approaching the *Mississippi River* soon. "Well this is the portion of the trip that I have been dreading", Steve said. "Why so," questioned Marshall. "There aren't many places to cross, plus I feel like these trestles were probably prime targets to be taken out by the enemy. If we can cross at Vicksburg, it will be a miracle." The crew now trudged on through Louisiana hoping for the best.

As camp set up for the night each person, felt a little edgy considering the days events. The trio was a weary sort when they stepped from the suburban. "Even the access road are rough but when we have to drive on the track it really bangs us around", Wes told Blanca as they strolled to the food line now forming. Steve had mentioned the same to Kathy "we need another highrailer before we cross the Mississippi."

"Where do you think you can find one?"

"I'm not sure, but we can't make many miles like this."

"If you left us and went into a large city where the yards are bigger could you find one there?"

"I think so"

"Well why don't you tell the group and leave us for a day?"

"You're right we will talk about it after supper."

The evening meal complete Steve proposed the idea of leaving the train parked in a safe location while the team went into a larger city to locate a new highrailer. The opinion was that this might be the only option. No one wants to drive across the Mississippi with one tire straddling a rail. The decision made, tomorrow morning the trio would leave and venture onto the highway in hopes of locating a large rail yard.

The suburban packed with coolers of food in addition to extra ammo and emergency equipment; plastic containers were bungee corded to the roof. A plan

worked out for a return signal. Should the group be held in a hostage situation they would toss a M18 smoke grenade as soon as they could be spotted. By telling their captors, it was necessary to identify themselves they would actually be warning the train. As they were preparing to pull out Kathy wanted a picture of them in front of the rig. She joked it was for her scrapbook but inside she felt something may go wrong. Dana had been feeling ill for the last two days but did not want to worry Marshall. However, Michelle told her dad this morning and Steve in addition to Wes suggested he stay with her. Two of the students from the gun car offered to take his place. As they were pulling away Mark joked, "Now keep them boys away from those porn stores when yaw'll go in there". The boys grinned, sitting in the back with bags of equipment stacked between them. Moving away from the train Wes navigated the way. In an attempt to enter the nearest city, quietly they had planned to stick to back roads. "Looks like Monroe is going to be it", Wes said as he pulled a highlighter from the glove box of the car.

"How far?"

"About forty-five miles as the crow flies."

"Keep your eyes open back there and don't get trigger-happy."

"Yes sir," the boys replied.

"We can stay on 15 and pass through Pine Grove. When we reach there let's look for a gas station and top off the tank in case we need to make a hasty retreat from Monroe."

"Sounds like a good idea."

The countryside was burned in some places and completely untouched in others. The occasional house and farm field revealed no sign of life although the reason for the absence of the people remained a mystery. "Where do you think everyone went", Steve asks as he steered around a downed tree.

"Beats me, it looks like someone should step out any minute and wave to us."

"I would like to find someone who can tell us what is going on in the world; all we get are those recordings from the president over the radio."

"I'm doubting he is alive or we would be hearing something new. Plus remember what Mike was saying I haven't seen anything even a bird fly over."

"Yep, that is what worries me, where is our air force."

"Let's stop and check out that bridge."

Further investigation showed damage but not to the extent, it was impassable. The area for about two hundred yards was heavily charred to the point of collapse by the utility poles for the next mile. Again, the question, where did this come from, Matt and Jason walked across positioning themselves at a small grove of scorched pine trees. As Steve pulled across with Wes out front checking things as they went. They repeated this at every long bridge they approached on their way in to Monroe. Each area proving to be more damaged than the last. Discussions among the team lead each to believe that Monroe was going to be a shambles when they arrived.

Pine Grove proved to be different, a small crossroads town like so many they had passed on the way from Texas. Pulling into a mini-mart Matt took the fuel pump made by Alan and slid it into the gas tank. As he started to fill, the Suburban Jason walked in the store to see if there was anything of value. Wes checked the load ensuring the cargo remained tied down. Steve crossed highway 15 to checkout another building. Inside he found the shelves picked clean of all merchandise. This raised questions about who had been here before. Could it have been right before impact or after? If after were they still around, if so would this be a friendly meeting or another shootout. Returning to the group, he told them of his find. Jason acknowledged the mini-mart was cleaned out also. Nothing left but some tobacco and the cash register was open with money still inside. However, when was the question Steve asks? "I would say after," Wes answered. "They knew money was of no value and everything else was". As they walked into the store together, Steve picked up a twenty-dollar bill

and lit it with his *Zippo*. "Always wanted money to burn", he joked. "You are right Wes", he said. "Everything even the dairy case has been cleaned out. Well they had a real disappointment here", Steve remarked pointing at the empty cases.

Back on 15, they headed to 165 hoping to enter Monroe about dark. 165 proved to be a far more challenge than they had encountered up to this point. "Traffic must have been in a state of panic", Wes observed to no one particular as the car sat on the shoulder of the highway. "I would say so", Steve agreed.

"You want to drive on the shoulder as far as we can"

"Let's try it and see what it brings"

"We may find ourselves zig zagging through this mess for miles."

"All right, you guys in the back keep your eyes peeled for any side roads we might use and of course, any trouble."

"Yes sir"

Wes was using the phone book taken from the mini-mart as a reference for the city of Monroe. "It appears we will be slowed down for a bit", he said tossing the book on to the front seat. After moving back and forth into on coming traffic, the shoulders and median, the Suburban proved itself well suited for the journey. "I can see a clearing two hundred yards ahead," Wes said as he dismounted the hood of a stalled eighteen-wheeler. Jason was standing on the roof of another truck agreeing with Wes. Looking with his field glasses he also spotted a secondary road leading off to the left.

"What do you think?"

"I see it now; yes, we should go for it." He dismounted again. Walking to Steve, he held his rifle in one hand and bottle of water in the other. "It looks like we may get a break in the jam."

"Good because this snail pace and zig zagging is making me crazy."

"Me too, I'm glad we decided to let these guys come along instead of trying to do this alone."

"What, you don't enjoy my company on a road trip?"

"Oh! Shut up before I shoot you in the foot."

"If you do, you will have to bandage it and drive!"

"Well then, I'll shoot you in the arm, the cars an automatic."

Working into the clearing and after some creative driving they made the side road spotted by Jason. Once on it they had open driving for a few miles. "Just think of that", Matt said "all of these people trying to fit on one road when they could have taken this one and probably made it out of town."

"Well", Wes said, "people are creatures of habit they go the only way they know or by set routine."

"I could see that"

"When I was a firefighter it happened to people in high-rise buildings all of the time, they go in and out the building using the same door day after day. When something happens, they walk right by a fire exit to go out the usual door."

"How strange!"

"We just become creatures of habit."

"Is that why we are using side roads whenever we can?"

"That is part of it, the other is bad guys are more likely to watch main roads thinking that people are more inclined to use them especially people like us that don't know their way around or perhaps an invading army that needs to move large amounts of troops and equipment."

"You really are smart about these things Wes", Matt said.

Steve looked into the rearview mirror and said "don't let him fool you kid. He watched every John Wayne war movie made at least twice".

"While you were watching Big Bird no doubt!"

The car erupted into laughter and Steve almost clipped a fallen power pole. The air began to take on the smell of death; it was a smell that could be distinguished from the

other smells they had become accustomed. It was unique unto itself. In addition, this meant they were approaching the city limits and they began to tense up a bit. Wes retrieved the phonebook folding the pages to find a map and the rail yard. Pausing to get their location from a road sign, he began to adjust the course. "Turn right as soon as you can," he advised. "If we can get clear passage on 165 that will take us to Dixie Ave.", he remarked as he studied the book. "Turn here on Standifer" he commanded quickly. The car moved around a stalled delivery truck and the street opened up for a few blocks with nothing but papers blowing in the breeze. "Keep alert back there", he cautioned, "we are in a likely ambush zone. Now a right on 165, It should be only a few blocks." The yard came in view and each person was glad to see it offering up a small celebration. When they came to a stop Steve told Matt to get as high up in the yard tower as he could and serve as a lookout. The others scattered throughout the yard searching for a highrailer. "We need to get it and go ASAP," Steve told them. "I have a bad feeling about this place. What is giving you the willies here?" Wes asks.

"Look at all of the cars in the yard."

"So what about them"

"Every door is open on them; someone has gone through here before us."

"I see what you mean"

"As close as these cars are together this is no place for a gunfight".

"You're right about that!"

The search lasted for about thirty minutes when Jason found a group of trucks on a siding. Racing back, he reported that they were on rails but he was not sure if it was what we needed. The three ran to the location where Steve shouted with joy. "Good job! This will work nicely." "What kind of stuff is this?" Wes said looking at the strange machinery. "It belongs to the *Gandy Dancers* or track repair crew. Their job is to keep the track in good working order by replacing ties or rails and anything else in bad shape." Moving past a long line of track equipment Steve approached a large truck with

a boom mounted to the bed. "We will take this one." The truck had a dead battery and Jason went for the Suburban. During his absence, the two remaining men stripped it of all unneeded items. "This is a two and a half ton beast it can go anywhere we need to" Steve said to Wes as he tossed boxes of electrical gear to the ground. Wes yelled from the inside, "It is four-wheel drive also". The four-door cab designed to haul a crew of five and it offered room to expand. With Jason's return they started the big truck heading for the tower to pick up Matt, they could see him running down the outside stairs." Movement about four blocks away" he gasps trying to breathe and talk at the same time. They threw everything into the truck as fast as possible while making certain that ammo cans went in the cabs. Steve jumped behind the wheel as Wes placed several 9mm's and two 45's between them. "Don't worry about reloading just drop one and grab another" he said. "I know it will be hard to drive and shoot so you use the handguns or the cut down shotgun. I will keep you supplied". Wes turned to the backseat and said, "Use the shotguns for up close and the AR-15's for further out. Try your best to make every shot count, but put **a lot of fire** on any target you engage. Keep the ammo boxes on the seat between you. But most importantly don't panic" Steve now had the truck moving out of the yard at a blistering pace for the big truck.

The movement Matt had spotted was four SUV's heading down Hippolyte Ave and they were coming fast. The street had been cleaned all the way to the yard. "No doubt" Steve said as they were pulling out on to Dixie, "this was their supply depot". Wes answered back "that explains the open cars." "Yep! I agree." The SUV's were gaining on the truck" they have us at a disadvantage on several points" Steve yelled as they headed down to their next turn on 165. "One is they know where they are and two is they can outrun us." About Thomas St., they opened fire hitting the rear of the equipment bed. A second vehicle cut across a parking lot. This gave a field of fire for Wes and Matt who let loose with a volley from their AR-15's. The bullets stitched the full length of the Jeep Cherokee causing it to veer away for only a moment. Returning

to the chase, the rear passenger opened fire shooting wildly as the Jeep bounced around. The truck was more stable but slower and harder to negotiate all of the junk in the street. Wes grabbed the *Mossberg* pistol grip and yelled back to Matt," put everything you can at the driver's door." Both men opened up, Matt emptied a full twenty round magazine as Wes poured eight rounds of 00 buckshot as quickly as he could pump the action. The Jeep now filled with holes slammed into several parked cars. Steve was now turning onto Standifer making a break for 165bypass. Jason had been leaning out of the window now had a clear shot at the pursing cars. Matt snapped in a fresh mag. and crawled to the other side. Both young men were firing out the window sending a shower of hot brass on the back of Steve. Wes had reloaded the shotgun and positioned himself sitting in the passenger window shooting across the roof. Steve had picked up one of the 9mm's and fired from the driver's window. The close gap between the vehicles meant both sides were scoring hits. Jason bounced away from the window yelling in pain holding his shoulder. Wes shouted to him "packet it with gauze I get to you when I can". The side of the truck had several groups of bullet holes but none was in a vital area. The team consternated its fire to the lead unit causing the windshield to become a spider web of shattered glass making it swerve from the street into a nearby building. The third and fourth pursuit cars decided they did not want to end up like their amigos, slowed to a stop.

Steve now turned onto Dellwood heading for 15. After a few minutes when they were sure no one was following, he pulled the truck over. Running to the rear, he pulled out Jason as Wes scrambled though the gear tossed into the back. Jason's shirt covered with blood, as was the seat. The medic bag found Wes went to work on him. Matt ordered up the road about fifty yards to serve as a lookout. They also did not want him to see how bad his friend was hit. He sat on the running board telling Wes "it hurt at first but not now does that mean I am going to die".

"No, that happens sometime"

"How bad is it?"

"Lucky for you it went clean through and didn't hit a bone. Here take this.

What is it?"

"Vicodin, it's for pain. Drink some water with it."

As he worked on Jason, Wes reassured him that he was not going to die and that he did a good job packing the wound without any help.

"Well Matt packed a lot of it after the shooting stopped."

"Good job by both of you."

"Will it leave a scar?"

"I am afraid so"

"Well wait till the girls see this, I am a wounded hero!"

"Yes you are, not many people could have performed as well back there. OK back inside for you."

Steve had cleaned the inside of the truck of blood as best as he could, but trace elements remained, using most of the alcohol and peroxide in the kit. He told Wes that they would need to resupply whenever they could. Signaling for Matt, They mounted up and continued back to the train." We won't make it during the daylight hours with all of the junk on the roads." Steve mentioned to Wes. "Guess we should find a place to hole up for the night."

"I think so".

"Once we get back to the side roads, we can make a little time."

They found a country house, with no cars in the yard to indicate anyone inside. After a closer look, it seemed the owners had vanished leaving everything intact. With Jason propped up on the couch, the others produced an evening meal and organized the truck. A closer look at the truck listed the number of bullet holes at twenty-six." We were very lucky back there," Wes said as they closed a compartment door. "If Matt hadn't spotted them, they would have caught us with our pants down."

"Yep! Those young men did a good job back there and I aim for the entire group to know it."

The three worked a shift standing watch until daybreak. After a quick breakfast, and Jason seated in the truck and the crew mounted up with expectations of reaching the train by midday. Once they wormed by all of the traffic jammed on the highway it became the standard drive down one back road after another. Until Wes, checking his map announced the train should be about four more miles. A sigh of relief went around.

CHAPTER 10

With the team gone securing a new highrailer, things at the train had settled into a routine of daily chores. A few washing machines hook to generators provided the opportunity to do laundry, with clotheslines strung and clean clothes flapping in the breeze. Many of the young women had taken over the job of cooking to give Kathy, Blanca and Tami a break. Robert had walked with other young men a few miles ahead to check track and scout for any surprises that might be in store for them. With the exception of guard duty the group relaxed and talked about what they hoped the outcome of this trip would be. Many of them questioned Jeff concerning the *Biltmore* and surrounding area. He assured them that it was the best place he could think of to ride out a bad situation. Mike had monitored the bank of radios waiting for some news of what was going on in the world, but it never came.

Kathy was sitting with Blanca drinking a glass of white wine and talking about her worries of the trip to find a new truck.

"I just feel it in my bones that they got into some type of trouble"

"I am a bit worried myself; they had to travel quite a distance to get to Monroe"

"Plus, it was a very narrow escape last time, now they have no one to come and help."

"They will be back soon, most likely today."

As they were talking Luke who had been on top of the train serving as look out yelled down. "I see a large white truck coming." Weapons drawn and breath held as the vehicle came into view. It stopped and sounded the air horn three long blasts. Cheers went up and thank you prayers offered as the truck slowly made its way into the camp. When the travelers dismounted, it was easy to see that it had been a hard trip. Sasquatch broke lose from Blanca and rushed toward Wes knocking him off his feet. As he regained his footing, Blanca almost took him down again with a tremendous bear hug. Matt was helping Jason step down as he smiled brightly with his arm in a sling. The young people surrounded them as they excitedly told of their adventure. Kathy ran to the driver side and jumped into Steve's arms. "I was so worried about you," she cried. "I was sort of worried myself "he replied as he gathered her up in his arms.

Wes checked Jason's shoulder applying a fresh bandage and talking with Sister Carol about how to take care of his wound. "I have been giving him Vicodin every six hours for pain and don't let him lift too much for a while." Matt peered over watching the procedure. He grinned as he walked away with Wes." He is going to play that with the girls for all it is worth".

"If you are Jealous, we could shoot you."

"No thanks, I do well enough with the girls as is." He grinned again

"I'll bet you do".

Robert and Mark were looking over the new highrailer counting bullet holes as they went. Afterward they walked to where Steve was sitting with Kathy and having a sandwich. Robert spoke first," looks like it wasn't an easy trip."

"I've had better ones and I tell you those two young guys made the difference back there."

"It looks like a heavy gunfight went on by the amount of brass in the cab and holes in the truck."

"Yep! It was run and gun for about twenty blocks through some junky downtown streets."

"How many were you up against?"

"Four SUV's couldn't tell how many inside. After we smoked two the others decided, they had enough."

"Well rest up for awhile, we will outfit the truck for you."

"Thanks, thanks a lot."

Steve looked at Kathy and said, "What I need now is a hot bath plus some clean clothes." "Can do," she said walking away to get things underway. The bathtub was a steel stock tank taken from a farm supply store. It had been set up behind several blue tarps with the water heated in barrels by a propane burner rigged up by Alan. The water came from a nearby stream and after heating used for various cleaning task but not for drinking. Settling into the hot water, he asks Kathy if she wanted to wash his back. She responded, "If I get near you, we will splash all the water out of that tub. Just behave yourself for now." A long nap followed the bath, as the men were more exhausted than they realized.

When the evening meal was completed, the topic of discussion was how soon the trip would continue. Midday tomorrow seemed in agreement as so it was set. "If we have clear track and don't need to move any stalled trains we should arrive at the *Mississippi* in time to check the bridges. It would be a good idea to send a team across to Vicksburg and see what kind of surprises if any await us". When the meeting was over Kathy pulled Steve aside and told him in no uncertain terms that he was not going to be part of the team to cross the river in advance. "Listen to me, you are always out front in the truck and went after a new one when the other got shot all too Hell. So let someone else take a few chances."

"I will, besides we have to stay with the truck."

"Well let Alan go he doesn't work the train or the truck like the others"

"I will work out a plan tomorrow to be sure he goes"

"Great! Now! Find that bottle of chardonnay and let's have a glass or two before bed."

"Yes! Dear!"

"I'm just trying to lookout for you."

"I know and you are right."



CHAPTER 11

The plan devised for a small team to cross the river using the I-20 Bridge. They would travel at night taking shelter in the *Mississippi Welcome Center*. By noon of the next day, the recon work should be complete. The train and highrailer would hold

fast near the *Louisiana Welcome Center* watching for the signal. With details worked out the advance, team mounted the truck for the six-mile ride to the river crossing. The tracks ran parallel to I-20 with about four hundred feet separating them. Alan and Mike plus three of the students moved across the opening and on to the interstate, they carried packs full of MRE's and water in addition to all the extra ammo they could find room for. The bridge was a solid configuration of smashed cars and trucks of every description. Watching through binoculars Steve and Wes could see in the fading light of the day that the trip would be a slow one. In some places, the team had to crawl across the hoods of cars.

"Do you want to stay here for the night or go back to the train?"

"Its six miles"

"I know but it would be nice to sleep with my wife tonight"

"I have often said that about your wife."

"I am going to have to shoot you for sure"

"Well make it a clean shot; you know how I feel about pain"

The pair crawled back through the tall grass and moved toward the truck. At dusk, they returned and the evening meal was nearing completion. Maria and Karen along with Sister Carol questioned them if they could see if the group made it across. Steve told them that it was to dark to see well and the bridge was heavily congested with traffic but he felt sure they were all right. "Now they know how I feel all of the time," Kathy said as she spread out a small camping tent. Several of the people had started using tents due to the crowding of the train, also to have a little privacy. Steve pulled off his boots and pulled his wife close as they settled in for the night.

"Aren't you afraid a gator might crawl in here he ask?"

"No, your snoring will keep them away"

CHAPTER12

Across the river, the five members of the advance team settled in for a short nap. The welcome center did not look very welcome as they moved into it at dark. Nearly all of the windows facing the river were gone and the glass seemed to crunch louder than normal under their feet. The smell influenced by the breeze drifting from the river was that of many factors each one enough to make a person gag. Mike had moved behind what once was the service desk where he sat on a stool as he scanned with his night vision glasses as he tried to eat. "The stench is so bad", he told Matt "I can hardly force this food down." "Well to tell you the truth it didn't taste much better on the way to Monroe". Matt had placed a stool near Mike scanning the southern section of the river.

"We will let the others rest, then change with them about midnight."

"When we crossed it was too dark to see the water, but I could hear a lot of bumping and banging down there."

"So could I but I was more concerned about the junk we were crawling over and how bad that placed smelled to pay it much mind."

"It was pretty bad out there; I don't know how anyone will ever clean that up"

"I don't know either but I'm glad I don't have to be the one to do it."

They changed watch advising the others of no activity observed. The relief group moved chairs closer to the windows settling in for the first view at sunrise.

Alan and Mike discussed a plan for the recon job as they heated up a pot of coffee and decided which of the MRE's would be good for breakfast. "They will be watching for a signal at noon from across the rail bridge. So let's split up and cover the town in two sections leaving one person here to scan the river." Matt having been the one to go on the Monroe trip was left at the Welcome Center. Taking one of the other young men with them, they separated with the meeting time of eleven o'clock. "It will be light in about an hour so I want to get into the city under the cover of darkness", Mike

said as he motioned to William to follow him. Alan followed in about ten minutes moving at an angle to take him and Dan above the city where they could enter it from the east side.

As light appeared the two teams worked themselves to high vantage points in buildings scanning as much of the business district as possible. Mike position William in a corner office telling him "if you see anything come and get me don't yell out. For Pete's sake if you hear something don't shoot until you know what it is." He moved to the other side of the building over-looking another section of town. Setting behind an important executive's desk by the appearance of what remained he now watched and waited. It reminds of the hunting trips with dad he thought as he scanned for any sign of life.

With the rising of the sun, true horror of the enemy action was becoming more reveled. They no doubt used chemical weapons in effort to save the valuable river port for their own plans. If the enemy could gain control of the *Mississippi*, it would divide the country and certainly limit the amount of goods that could be handled not only on the river but also on any type of bridge crossing it. With gunboats patrolling it, the nation would rely on aircraft or ships going through the *Panama Canal* if the canal was still in friendly hands. The fact that the enemy did not occupy Vicksburg gave hope that America was winning or had won the war.

Alan worked his way into the east side of town with Dan on his heels. They stopped on a mound over looking a section of residential and commercial buildings." You stay here and don't move from this spot no matter what," as he dropped Dan off. He continued his move another three hundred yards to a higher vantage point. It was now 7:30 and he was estimating the amount of time to return for the meeting at eleven. He was nervous and it was showing as he slipped a bag of *M&M's* from the pocket on his small pack. Fidgeting with them, he said under his breath, "if the shit hits the fan

everyone else is across the river and who knows if they will even know in time.”

Scanning the city, he could only see wreckage and rotting corpses.

"Nothing to report", Mike said

"Same here and the smell gets worse every time the wind changes direction."

"Matt was telling me the water keeps changing colors"

"Yeah, I noticed that too."

"Let's get ready to signal the observes."

CHAPTER 13

The "*Lead Dogs*" were up before sunrise to make it to the river and secure a good observation point before the sun got too high in the sky. "Can I go with you and watch," Kathy asks.

"Sure, if you like."

"Well I would like to get off the train for a while".

"I understand, besides the company would be enjoyable".

The coolers stacked in the truck along with extra equipment for the mission. They were taking Bill along as a runner. When Kathy took a seat in the back of the truck Wes said, "at least I will have one intelligence person to talk to". "Hit him for me will you" Steve said pointing to Bill. "Hit him for me too", Marshall added. Bill punched Wes in the shoulder three times. "One for me he added." As they pulled away, the squad went over the plan one more time. We will stop about a half mile from the bridge. I will stay on the track with the scope focused on the far end looking for the signal, Steve will move to the right about half the distance from the track and I-20.

Marshall will move to the left about one hundred yards and Bill will remain with me as the runner. All agreed it was a good plan.

“Why no lights” Kathy asks

“Well the lights would give us away to anyone watching and the moon is bright enough to see by, Plus Wes doesn’t need to steer the truck and we can see the outline of the bridge in time to stop.”

“How about when we get out?”

“We move slowly and your eyes will have adjusted to the light by then.”

They moved on at twenty-five miles per hour until Wes spotted the point chosen as the O.P. The unloading was well planned first came a heavy tarp spread out as the telescope was assembled from its case. Wes would need this to see a person because of the great distance across the river, then the Barrett 50cal. Next Marshall and Steve collected gear for their assigned areas. Steve handed Kathy a pair of binoculars and a tarp. He then picked up a cooler, a spotting scope taken from a sporting goods store and binoculars. Strapping on a small field pack he looked at her and said “I’m glad you came, don’t forget your rifle”. She smiled a crooked smile at him and said, “Shame if you had to carry all of this yourself.”

As the two of them made their way in the tall grass, it seemed like they were the only two people on earth. After a steady walk, they came upon a good location to see the railroad and I-20 plus a view of the river. Spreading out the tarp Kathy questioned.

“What is that constant booming sound?”

“We don’t know, it has been dark both times we were here so we can’t see it.”

“Well it has a constant rhythm to it like a pianist hitting the same note over and over.”

“Yes and sounds very much like the last time”.

“Do you need some help with that?”

“Sure, catch the corner and pull out. Now where is the spotting scope?”

“Why the scope and binoculars?”

“The scope is more powerful but doesn’t have the wide range of view. So, when we see something it will help bring it in closer.”

The pair made themselves comfortable on the tarp waiting for daylight. About an hour into the wait the noise changed from the rhythmic boom to a loud screech followed by a lesser booming noise.

“Guess the pianist changed notes”

In a short time, the sun began peaking through the ubiquitous layer of smog bringing a new day. With the daylight came the answer to many questions. The sound, which puzzled everyone, was river barges banging against the cells surrounding the railroad trestle and the I-20 Bridge. Numerous loads had ruptured and poured into the river causing threads of various colors to blend downstream. In addition, the tugs after losing contact had propelled themselves into the bank or other objects floating by. The change of the sound during the night most likely came from barges washing by, knocking the stranded barges into a new position. Scanning the river and adjacent to the shore all types of debris could be found from corpses of human and animal to farm equipment. As they took a visual inventory, Steve spoke aloud “I wonder how far some of this has traveled to end up here”. Kathy answered, “I wonder what it must be like in New Orleans”? They focused on the buildings and surrounding area to study for signs of movement but the river kept drawing them back to survey more items floating by. In about two hours from first, light Steve pulled the cooler between them.

“Care for a mid-morning snack”

“What do you have in there?”

“Granola bars, raisins, pop tarts, tons of stuff; I also have some MRE’s in my pack”.

“Let me have a granola bar”

“Something to drink with it?”

“What have you got in that department?”

“Thermos full of coffee, juice and *Diet Cokes*”

“I’ll go with the *Coke* and toss in another granola bar”

As they were settling in for a break, across the river Mike was preparing to pick up William and head to the welcome center. It had been uneventful and he was hoping that it would remain the same. The two spoke on the first floor before entering the street both agreed that nothing was moving and the city void of all life. Mike was thinking that it would take a lot of work but for the most part the city could come back.” After all” he said under his breath” the buildings and workings are still good only the people are missing.” The pair moved down the side street ever on the alert until they called out to Matt that they were coming in. upon entry Alan and Dan were waiting. “Nothing to report”, Mike said as he dropped his pack on the counter. “Same here”, Alan answered. The five men started to make a signal flag to advise the observers that it would be safe to cross the bridge. Stepping onto the rail bridge at exactly twelve noon, Mike raised a piece of cloth tied to a section of pipe. Swinging it back and forth, he signaled the coast was clear as Wes watched him through the telescope. “All clear” Wes reported. “Give them the counter sign”. Bill pulled on the truck’s air horn twice as Wes continued to watch. “They heard you,” he stated. Marshall had rejoined Wes and Bill to report all clear and that he for one would be glad to have this river behind him. Wes agreed expressing his concern about how well the bridge was holding up to, the constant force of the junk plus the river pushing against it. As they talked Kathy and Steve stepped into the clearing. “I am worried about that myself” Steve expressed.

“What should we do?”

“Well I guess we will have to walk it and look for signs of weakness”

“That is going to be a very long and exposed walk”

“I hope the recon report is right and bad guys don’t catch us in the middle.”

“Well first things first, let’s get the train up here. Bill we are going to send you back to let them know what is going on. Kat do you want to go with him.”

“No I think I will stay up here with you”

Marshall Spoke "I think I would like to go back and check on Dana if it's all right."

"Sure if you want take the truck and the two of you ride instead of Bill using the mountain bike. We will wait here."

As the truck departed for the rear, the remaining trio sat on boxes and chatted as they prepared lunch.

"So what do we have for today?"

"Well I've got home made bread, deviled ham, cheese in a can and the ever present fruit cocktail."

"What's in that box?"

"Looks like *Spam*, ravioli, baked beans, beef stew, green peas, mac and cheese and assorted snack foods."

"They should be back in a few moments you want to wait and see what's on board."

"Sure, by the time we fix any of this they will be here. Just give me a box of raisins."

Kathy gathered three drinks from cooler. Handing them out, they continued to watch the parade of items float by on the *Mississippi*. The debris piling up around the cells and columns caused the channel to narrow and increased the already swift current, picking up speed as it flowed through the narrow "V". "I hope the trestle will hold", Steve said repeatedly.

The sound of the train grew louder now with the highrailer leading the way. As they neared, the crew began to pack up gear and prepare for the crossing.

"How should we do this", Wes asks.

"Well my thinking is that nothing on the train can't be replaced on the other side if need be. So if the bridge is too weak to use we may have to start over on the other side."

"That would be a lot of work to repeat."

“Yes! It would, but if the trestle won’t hold or the rails are out of alignment, we could have another *Sunset Limited*, on our hands.”

“What is a *Sunset Limited*?” Kathy questioned

“Several years ago, a barge captain got lost in the fog on a Louisiana bayou and hit a bridge. It appeared to be all right to him. The *Amtrak* train *Sunset Limited* came through a few moments later. When the first engine hit the trestle, the rails were not in alignment causing a huge derailment, fire and loss of life.”

“Sounds bad”

“It was the worst in modern history; I don’t want it to happen here.”

“We will cross slower than they were traveling won’t we”

“Yes, but I still worry about the rails in the center of the section where the most stress is at.”

“So what should we do?”

“I am thinking about asking all of the people to walk across the highway and have only the crew on board.”

“That might be our best solution”

As the discussion was on going, the highrailer pulled to a stop behind them. Climbing from the cab Marshall asks the question on everyone’s mind.” So what do you think?” The train now slowing to a stop with a low moan drowned out Steve’s reply. The group now unloading walked forward to see the river some for the first time in their lives. Sister Carol approached Steve asking if the ones on the other side were all right. “Yes, all are secure” he assured her.

“It is time for another meeting and a little bite to eat would be welcome also,” Steve said. The noon meal was worth waiting for and the plans decided. The first suggestion offered by someone was to take several of the heavy cars from the rear of the train and shove them across at a high speed to see if the bridge would hold. “That sounds like a good idea Mark added but when these cars reach the other side they

will keep going until the grade of the track changes and then they will come back to us at a high speed.” It was decided that two people would walk the trestle followed by the highrailer. If things appeared to be normal, the train minus the passengers would follow. As Kathy was documenting the river and the town with photos for her journal, Steve spoke with the group about the walk across the highway bridge. “It’s really jammed up in some places with cars and truck piled into each other. It’s not a pretty sight nor smell just climb over and keep going.”

The group made their way toward the highway as Steve and Wes began to walk the track. Marshall followed at a distance of about two hundred feet as Mark waited for the signal to proceed. A strong wind was blowing and about midpoint of the walk, the two men paused for a brief break to evaluate the progress. “I think we are going to be all right”, Steve said as he looked far below to the water.

“Yep! I think so“ Wes answered. “This old steel bridge looks like it will still do the job.”

“It is a pretty bridge the traditional steel style almost like a work of art.”

“Everything is now concrete and they all look alike.”

Waving to the truck the pair climbed in the cab and said, “Stop just before we reach the other side so we can check the rail alignment.” At about two hundred feet from the opposite shore, the highrailer slowed for them to dismount. As they checked it over the scouts walked from the *Welcome Center* to meet them. “Nothing to report”, Mike said as he stood next to his dad. “Glad to hear that, it was going to be a long detour if we ran into trouble.”

A few of the crowd walking the highway were coming to the end of their journey. The scouts moved to assist them in finding a place to rest. Several were gagging and exclaiming about the horror of the trip across. The smell was awful but the sight was even worse Sister Carol was heard to say as she went to sit on a rock wall. Most of the others were in agreement with her. Angela in talking with Amber said,

“It was like being on stage for a horror movie but we made it.” Each person had carried a rifle in case of trouble. The bridge was no place to be caught unarmed. They also carried water bottles and now most were drinking copious amounts trying to keep their stomachs in check. The crossing time had been about one hour but it must have seemed like hours after crawling across hoods and roofs of cars full of rotting bodies.

The train made an uneventful crossing and many offered prayers of thanks. As they remounted, the train and the *Lead Dogs* prepared to head out for the two-mile spacing. Kathy came to see Steve as he was spreading out the map for the next leg of the journey. When he looked at her, he said, “I would feel better if you didn’t come on this trip.”

“I know and I won’t ask because this will be far more dangerous and you will spend too much time worrying about me and not your job.”

“You did a good job back there and I appreciated your help, we all did.”

“Thanks I just wanted to do something besides ride and cook.”

“I know and the next time something else comes up, I will call you.”

CHAPTER 14

“Looks like the next stop is Bovina”, Steve announced as he climbed into the cab. Moving back to the normal routine they rolled along for a distance with little distraction. With the next junction coming up on the mile markers Marshall eased the highrailer to a slow stop as Wes and Steve prepared to check the small town for life. As they walked the track, the two of them spoke slightly above a whisper about the crossing. In the distance Steve spotted a movement at once, he motioned to stop.

“I see something ahead”

“Most likely, another dog, we haven’t found anything else in who knows when.”

“I will move up and you keep me covered.”

“Right”

As he crouched forward, a small house by the tracks came in



to

view. Again, he could see movement. Working into a group of saplings a scanned of the house brought forth the source. On the front porch, he spotted a man sitting in a chair who was relaxed by his appearances. Steve stepped back on the track walking in a non-threatening manor he approached the house hoping that if anything went bad Wes could cover him. The man spotted him and said in a loud voice” Shoot if you must but I don’t have anything you want.” Stepping on to the crossing Steve answered back, “I bear you no harm, mind if we talk for a moment.” The old man welcomed him into the yard. Steve began.

“There is a group of us traveling by train and we will be passing by. We have no intention of harming anyone we just want safe passage.”

"That's alright by me I don't want any trouble"

"Are you alright, we have medical aid on board"

"I'm fine, where is your train"

"About two miles back, I am checking for trouble before they come up the line."

The old man moved into view. He was an old black man of about seventy years of age Steve guessed. It was also apparent he was not alone because a shadow was moving inside the house. "My name is Steve and this is my friend Wes", as Wes moved on to the crossing. The old man announced that he was Ray and that his wife was Hazel. She stepped from the door carrying a single barrel shotgun.

"Are you all alone?"

"Yes we are, so if you mean us harm it won't be hard to do."

"We mean no one harm mister I promise you, we only carry a gun because we have run into people that have tried to harm us."

"I trust in the Lord, so I will take your word."

"How have you been making it all of this time?"

"Well we go to town when we run out of things but we are simple people and don't need much."

"When the train gets here the people on board will be glad to pitch in and do what we can for you, or you and Hazel are welcome to go with us."

"No young man we have lived here all of our lives, that's eighty-two years so I reckon we will just stay."

"Think it over at least".

The train was slowing to a stop and once again, the group was dismounting to see what was going on. As they piled off Wes and Steve had taken up a position on the front steps of the house told Ray and Hazel who each one was and how they came about to join the group. The women began to speak with Hazel about food supplies and any needs they had. The men asked Ray about heating and lighting needs. At

last, the old couple relaxed speaking more freely. Ray said, "When things went bad most of the people just ran away and left everything. So we just live off the stuff left behind. Many of them said they were going to Vicksburg but no one has returned not even one." "Well", Marshall said, "if they went there, they aren't coming, back we just passed through it and the city is completely empty." Ray went on to say that, this was a very small town but had lots of farmland surrounding it. "If you are determined not to go with us what can we do to help you out," Mark asks.

"Well we need some wood or coal to burn for heat and cooking and we need a way to get our water from the well out back. Can you help with that?"

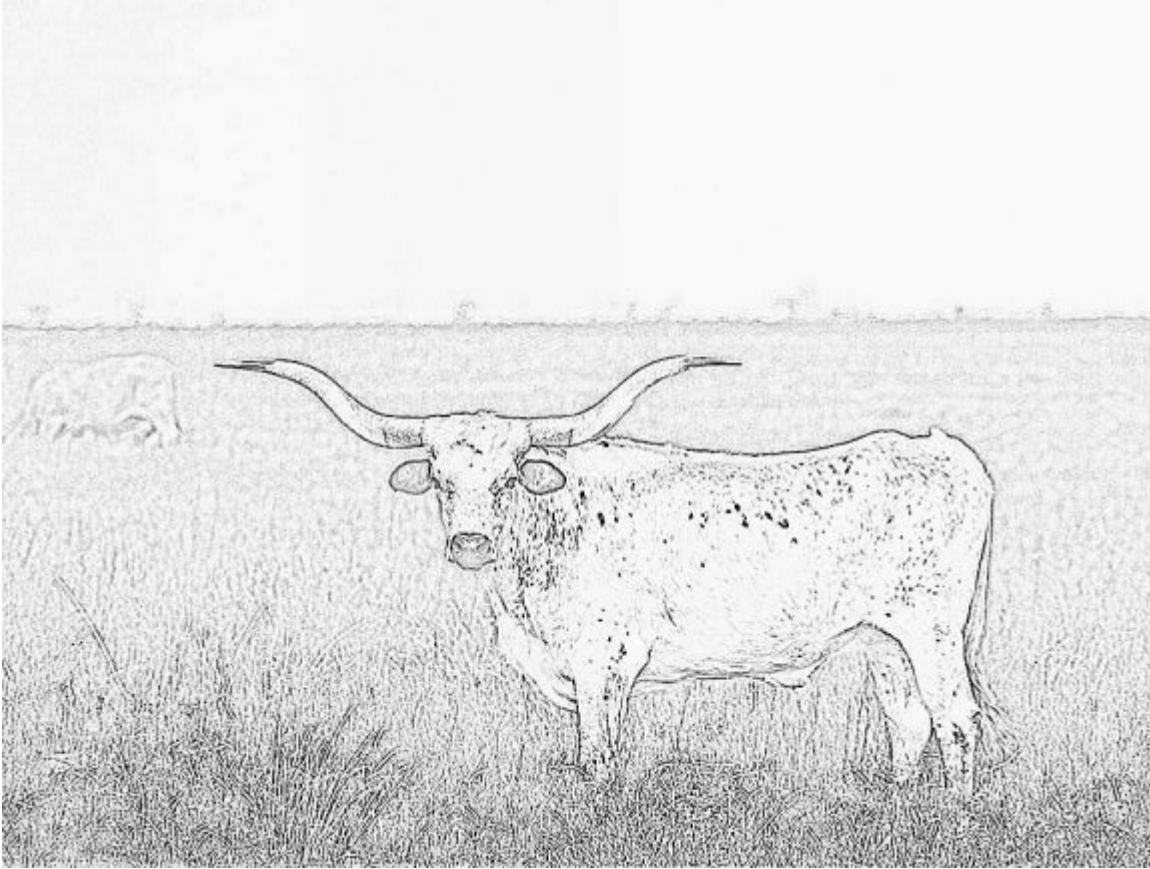
"Sure we can, come on guys let's get to work."

Mike took one of the power generators from the supply car and began to wire it to the pump on the well next he ran a line into the house. He told Ray that if he needed water to turn off everything in the house first. "The generator can only supply the well alone. When the well is not running you can have lights and the refrigerator or whatever you need." Outside chainsaws were humming as wood was reduced to stove size bits. Mark came to Steve with a suggestion about locating coal cars. "There must be some in the area let's ask." Ray told them that a train came by everyday headed for the power plant. "It came through here every morning at six you could set your watch by it. I should know I have lived by these tracks my whole life." Mark took Jeff and cut lose the front engine, they dashed up the track in search of the coal train. Feeling confident about the coal supply Steve redirected the work from wood to other things. Robert walked down the country road and in a few moments, the sound of a small engine could be heard. He returned with a *John Deer Gator* it was in a barn and started with a little encouragement. "Now you can drive to town and carry back anything you want."

Kathy, Tami and Blanca were talking with Hazel about food." Well girls we have a garden and I can most of what we eat but the thing that we are going to miss the most

is meat we are just too old to butcher one of those cows.” “What cows!” Yelled Kathy in such a manner that Hazel almost fell over. “The people down the road left six or seven behind when they ran away.” “Where, where” the girls screamed in excitement. “About a half mile that way,” she pointed down the road that ran perpendicular to their home on Stallings road. The girls almost leaped all the way through the door Kathy grabbing Steve by the arm and Blanca jumping on Wes’s back yelling, “We’ve got meat!” Tami did not know Jeff was gone with the train and she ran circles around the yard looking for him.

“It’s time for a round up,” Robert said as the men headed down Stallings road to the Harris farm. In the pasture were six Jerseys, “milk cows” yelled Steve as they approached the gate. “If they haven’t been milked and taken care of they could have dried up,” Marshall said. “I have farmed for years and seen this happen before, so let’s see what we can do with them”. Each one was taken into the barn where Marshall worked with them and milked them to get them into the habit of producing again. As he worked the cows, he also gave direction as to what items needed to go back. Wes entered the barn and said “I think some more are in another pasture but they are too far away to tell if they are milk cows or not.” “Let’s look at them”, Marshall said. The men walked to the back pasture where it became clear that this was not a cow but a bull. One look at this bull could tell you he was a mean one. As he stared at the men his look said, **“Rodeo my ass, no clown in the world could save you from me.”**



“We

will save him for last”, Marshall said. Robert had worked his mechanical magic starting a tractor and jumping off a truck. “We can haul hay, feed on the hay wagon, and pull the stock trailer with the truck.” “Do you want to lead them or put them in the trailer”, Wes asks. “We can walk them it is only a short trip and they seem docile to me.” As he fashioned rope halters Marshall told the men what to load on the hay wagon. “Put these boxes and this stuff here on, next load as much of the feed as we get. It’s a good thing we have him with us”, Steve said to Wes. “Yes, it is.” The caravan of stock moved lazily down Stallings road with Robert bringing up the rear pulling the hay wagon. As they lead, their cows the chatter among them was about how everyone was going to be excited plus we could have fresh milk also. Turning the corner, they lead the heard into the side yard staking them out to graze. The entire group stood and looked at them like kids on Christmas morning. “Just wait until they get back with the train,” Steve said to Tami. “Jeff is going to go nuts”, she replied. Marshall

suggested that they have a place for the bull before they go after him.” How about the garage”, suggested Alan “there isn’t a car in it and we are not going to be here much longer.” The shed prepared as the men set off to bring in the big beast. Ridding back on the empty hay wagon they formulated the plan. Marshall said, “He will be very easy or we could have a full-scale mess own our hands.” As it turned out the operation went off with out a hitch. A second load on the wagon ensured the stock would be well supplied.

As the men were making their second trip Sister Carol was sitting on the porch talking with Ray and Hazel as they drank tea. She asks them if they knew the story about how she came to join the group. Ray said that Steve mentioned that they had run into you and your high school students in a place called Hooverville.” “Is that all he said” she asks. “Yep!” Answered Ray “is there more.”

“Let me tell the two of you the whole story.” She went into full detail about how the other Nun and the driver were murdered and how Steve had crawled under fire to them. She told of Mike moving them to the tree line when the fighting was at a lull. Finally the part of how the entire group had looked after them, and helped with more kindness than any group of people she had ever met. When she finished her eyes were moist and she said, “The boys and I would be dead now and it is frightening to think of what nightmare of life the girls would be living at this moment.” Sister Carol made mention of the fact that Marshall and his family came to them out of fear that their own towns people may turn them out when times got bad. However, this group took them in as if they were old friends. “Have you noticed she said no one gives orders, each offers suggestions and when a decision must be made, they put it to a vote?” Ray and Hazel looked at each other and nodded. She left the porch and did not return until the bull arrived.

With the second journey to the Harris farm completed, it was time for the midday meal. The yard filled with tables made from boards and sawhorses. Food

spread out and the line began to form when the air horn from the returning locomotive sounded. It was Mark and Jeff pushing three coal cars down the second track. The train moved past and came to a stop a few feet from the crossing. Climbing from the cab, the pair noticed the cows staked in the side yard. Letting out a yell that could have been taken from *Pickett's Charge* at Gettysburg the two men covered the distance to the house in seconds. "Who! Where!" Stammered Mark as he ran toward Marci. "We did a little shopping while you gone she coolly answered." Jeff was equally excited but he was also starved, so as others looked at the trainload of coal he made his way to the table.

As the workday ended, the teams surveyed their work. Mike had completed the electrical project; Alan had built storage racks to hold four fifty five gallon drums of gasoline to power the *Gator* plus the generator, firewood placed in ten different locations.

The women had been talking with Hazel about butchering a cow for them. She had replied that the meat would go bad before the two of them could use it all up. What she really wanted was canned meat. Now in the second bedroom of the house the women had stacked five cases of canned chunk chicken, five cases of beef stew, four cases of canned hams, cases of deviled ham and chicken plus ten cured country hams. In addition to the meat were ten-pound sacks of powdered milk and thanks to the army sacks of powdered eggs.

Ray remarked that this meal reminded him of home coming at the church, as he filled his plate with assorted food from the tables. During the meal, he worked his way to sit beside Steve and Kathy. They were sitting on a bench under a large oak tree. When he asks to join them, they welcome him and Steve told him not to get too close to Kathy while she is eating. "If she runs out she might grab something off your plate" he chuckled. She threw a green bean at him and laughed. Ray developed a

serious look and said “most of the people her tell me that you are in charge.” The couple looked at one another and replied, “I don’t think we are.”

“Well I think you are whether you know it or not.”

“What can we do for you”, Kathy questioned.

“To be honest we have a granddaughter that we would like to send with you. Her mother was on a trip to Vicksburg when the war broke out and we don’t think she survived.”

“Ray, we spent a day checking out Vicksburg, nobody made it we didn’t see a single person. Tell us about your granddaughter.”

“We sent her to the basement when we first seen you and she is hiding there now. I was afraid for her.”

“We understand what you are saying.”

“After seeing how this group has been so kind to us and what Sister Carol told us about how all of you put yourselves in danger to save them. Hazel and I would like to know if she could go with you. We are old and don’t want to leave here but when we die she will be all alone.”

“Of course, she can come with us”

“How will everyone else feel?”

“I don’t think a person here will object and if they do, they had better have a very good reason. Have you spoken with her about coming with us?”

“Yes and she would like to go only if she is welcome.”

“Well go and get her and let’s meet her.”

Ray went to the house and in a few moments, she appeared on the porch. At first glance, her age was about eighteen she was tall and thin. When Steve saw her he told Kathy, “I am sure she is scared to death right now.” The two of them moved from the tree to greet her. As they did, Mark in addition to Marci noticed her also. The four of them walked to the steps and introduced themselves. "My name is Tiffany but my

friends call me Tiff for short.” “Well come on Tiff and meet the group”, Mark said in his booming Texas voice. Moving across the yard, he helped her meet everyone. As he along with Marci was making the rounds, Kathy was talking with Hazel. “I promise you we will take good care of her”

Hazel looked back at her saying “after what Sister Carol and Dana said about the two of you I’m not worried at all. I just wish I could see her grow up.” Looking back at her Kathy said, “I wish you would reconsider going with us”

“No honey I have lived my whole life here. I was born in this house and my family has lived on this land for three generations. I can’t be anywhere but here.”

“Is there anything more we can do for you?”

“No honey, God blessed us with your help and taking care of Tiff that’s all we can ask for.”

Tiff began talking with Angela and Amber the three of them went to help her pack. As the girls were getting things in order, Kathy took her camera to take a picture of Ray and Hazel for her journal. She also took one of the three for them for each to have, in addition to the whole group in front of the house.

A brainstorming session was under way about how to handle the livestock when Ray walked up and said with a grin “I don’t mean to interrupt such serious thinking but in all my worries about Tiff I clean forgot to tell you that you may find some other animals down the road at the McNamara farm.” “Well Ray pull up a seat and tell us about it” Mark spouted with interest in his voice.

“They have a place about two miles down Robinson Church Rd.,” he pointed past his house. “You may want to check it out.” Marshall along with Robert climbed into the farm truck and headed out to investigate the possibility of adding more livestock to the growing heard. “This would be a major find if they returned with more animals”, Mark was heard to say as he watched the truck go out of sight. With the

quest for stock continuing the others began to work on making modifications to the railcars for shipment of the current ones.

Alan had taken the highrailer into town with a couple of the students to help him load supplies. In town they located a *Tractor Supply*. "This is just what we need", he said as they began to load metal fence gates, post and other farm supplies. Bales of hay and sacks of feed topped off the load. On his return, the floors of selected boxcars were covered with several inches of mulch and dirt to help give the animals traction on the slick wood surface plus help with absorption of waste. Alan now positioned the heavy metal gates against the inside reinforcing them with post in addition to using several sets of cast concrete steps made for mobile homes, these were heavy and cover enough surface area to prevent sliding. On the other side of the car, he manufactured a gate that could be opened so care could be provided. Metal troughs handled the feed and water overall, it was a well-improvised stock car.

With this task completed all eyes turned down Robinson Church Rd. to see what surprises the pair would return with. They did not have to wait long. Within minutes, Robert returned to gather assistance. "We could use a little help and the hay wagon". Volunteers piled on the wagon to assist delighted in the fact that to ask for help meant there must be lots of stock. When they arrived, Marshall had eight horses tied to a fence plus three goats pinned up but the real thing that caused excitement to run through everyone's veins was a lot full of chickens. Cheers went up as the assembly of eager people climbed from the back of the pickup truck. The hay wagon piled high with round bales looked precarious as it started up the road the truck showing strain as the wagon plus the bed of the truck loaded to capacity with salt and mineral licks in addition to every feed sack that could be stacked on. "Don't worry about overloading just keep piling it on", Robert shouted as the crew placed bag after bag on any flat spot they could find. "This truck is not likely to ever be driven again so if it breaks it breaks." The roof of the truck now supported feed sacks with the load

now four feet higher than the cab. The tractor now arranged to pull a farm wagon and a second trailer tied to it by chain. More and more necessary tack and equipment was stacked in any place found until at last all that remained was the chickens. Small cages fabricated using wire with each holding five or six of the constant fluttering and cackling birds. As the precession, headed back toward the train Wes said to Matt "I am glad it is not far to go, this equipment looks like it my give out any second." The crew was leading the horses as they walked behind the wagon. The goats tied to the wagon by leaders, with the horses bringing up the rear.

Alan was talking with Mark and Steve about how to make room in the cars for the new stock." We only kept two empty boxcars when we started but now we need more room".

"If we cleared off the crossties from the flat in front of the gun car, we could use it. That would help some."

"The bull must be separate from everything or there could be trouble."

"Let's ask Marshall when he gets back."

During the excitement with all of the stock, the coal cars placed on the near track and the bottom dump opened on each of the three this caused a mound to form at the base with the car itself holding the bulk in check. Steve was explaining to Ray "as you shovel from the pile it will naturally feed into the mound, so you won't have to get in the car." Ray had become confident in driving the *Gator*, he was moving around the neighborhood with ease. He told Steve as they spoke about the coal "I know we won't last much longer but these things will certainly made our time better."

The convoy approached the intersection with Robert in the lead. All eyes fixed upon them as the truck sputtered to a stop near the train. "Well we made a very good haul", he exclaimed stepping from the truck. Mark looked at him with a grin and said, "I'll say that rig looks like you didn't leave anything behind." Alan had the look of a man who had seen a ghost. "Where are we going to put all of that?"

“Well wherever you do, have plenty of room because more is on the way.”

“How much more?”

“Lots of stuff, plus the livestock”

“We have really hit the jackpot here”

As the men were talking, the main body of the caravan was coming into sight. The people that stayed behind were jumping up and down at the sight of the animals. Jeff dismounted the train and walked to Mark saying as he moved closer. “If the farm animals survived there is hope for wildlife in the area.” “Yes there is” Mark replied. “Maybe the world can recover from this madness.” Alan began directing the location for all of the new cargo. Working with Marshall the pair decided which car could hold the animals best. Cows were less jumpy than horses so the former were placed on a flat car that had been fenced in using heavy wire and split rail post. “Goat and horses get along well”, Marshall said; “sometimes they put goats in the stables to help calm racehorses.” Therefore, they put both in the boxcar once built for the cows. However, “Barbara” as the bull was now called was going to have a car of his own. When the guys from Texas started to call the bull Barbara, Marshall asked “why you would name a bull after a girl.” “Well” Mark said, “Most of us went to school together, there was a girl there that was so mean and ugly none of us would try to ride her either”. “I’m sure she had a great personality”, Marshall added.

At last, it was time for the train to move on. With tearful eyes, Ray and Hazel entered their house passing the TV. On it sat two pictures one was the three of them the other was of the group gathered on the front lawn. Tiff looked back until she could no longer see her home then she turned saying to Amber “well a new world waits”. Amber replied, “It does for all of us”.

CHAPTER 15

The highrailer crew was making good time in the country with few switches and not many towns to check. Ryan had changed places with Marshall allowing him to check on the livestock whenever the train stopped. As they moved along, he began to ask questions about what he should do if they ran into trouble. "Just cover Steve", Wes told him "but don't be too quick on the trigger. You did a great job back in Hooverville. But let's be sure that we can't talk our way out of a gunfight first." Steve was showing him how to read the railroad signal map and cross-reference it to the road atlas. "One tells us where we are on the track the other where we are in the state, plus the size of the towns coming up." Ryan became a quick study calling out mile markers and noting where single track changed to double.

In the cab of the train, Marshall was adjusting to the life of not knowing what was going on up front. "You guys are dependant on that radio aren't you"? "We would be driving blind without it", Mark said. Jeff and Mark had been alternating in the engineer's seat to give each other a break. Now Marshall moved behind studying their every move. The cab was somewhat crowded with equipment in addition to the M60 plus other weapons and ammo. Among the pile were several coolers of food, water and a box full of maps. Each person stepped carefully moving about.

In the second locomotive, Mike had taken a seat at the engineer's position while Matt sat in the conductor's chair. The pair had moved forward to provide more support in the event of trouble. With the train's operation handled up front, they were free to provide constant surveillance. The inside of the cab was stacked full of supplies. Each man had a short-barreled shotgun at the ready with M-16's and long-range scoped rifles within easy reach. They spoke with each other while continuing to sweep the sides of the tracks for movement.

“Do you think we will run into any more trouble?”

“I don’t know it seems to pop up when we think things are going well,”

“Of course we keep running into friendly people when we least expect it also.”

“How about that, running into those old people back there in the middle of nowhere.”

“Yep! That was something; they should have come with us. I have doubts about them lasting long all alone.”

“I’m glad they sent there granddaughter with us.”

“Why, Matt you horny little thing you.”

“You know what I mean Mike; at least she will have a chance for a good life after they are gone.”

“I’m sure that is what you meant.”

“It was, it really was”

As they were ridding in the rear Tiff was adjusting to new surroundings.” the first thing I realized” Amber told her “was there is no peer pressure anymore. You can wear what ever you like because there is not a style and no one cares. You can actually be yourself and not worry about being cool. But what is strange at first is when we pull into a safe town you can go shopping and when you see something you like, just pick it up no money required.” Most of the young people had begun to collect in the rear car in order to talk and to play their music without Sister Carol telling them to hold it down. Jason had his shirt open showing off his bullet wound and telling Tiff about the big shootout he was in. he was the only young man in the car, all of the rest were helping with various duties on the train, as were many of the young girls. Kathy, Marci and Tami had now moved into a supervisory role in the kitchen as many of the young girls were trying their hand at cooking. Sister Carol had spoken with the women about putting the girls to work. “It will keep

them busy and make them feel needed like the boys are. Also most of these girls come from upper class families and have never been taught how to cook.” Marci told them “if you can cook on a moving train using grills you can cook anywhere.”

CHAPTER 16

The conversation in the highrailer was light with the trio talking about assorted topics ranging from great addition of livestock to the weather showing signs of improvement. As they moved into an open area, the landscape began to change from green to scorched and finally burned black. “I wonder what this is all about”, Steve, questioned as they paused to check the burned crossties. “I think they will be all right, it appears that the fire swept through here quickly and didn’t burn things to deeply.”

“That’s good, what do you think caused it”

“I don’t know we are a long ways from a town according to the map.”

“Do you think we should check it out on foot or just keep moving?”

“Let’s keep moving but more slowly.”

As they moved another two hundred yards the answer to the questions became apparent. Around a small bend, about a quarter mile to the right was a large burned hulk. The truck eased to a stop, Steve and Ryan moved toward it as Wes stood by with radio in hand. It was a section of crashed missile broken into three parts. Both men looked at the markings on the unburned portion of the fuselage. “I don’t recognize them”, Steve said, “me either”, Ryan replied. They sketched it onto a piece of paper gathering as much information as they could to help indentify it. Returning to

the truck, they discussed it with Wes as he started moving down the track. Looking at the drawings, he suggested it was an inbound enemy missile shot down.

“Sounds good to me,” Steve agreed

“I can’t think of anything else that would have markings like that, it is certainly not American.”

“Yep! And I guess this is the first one we have seen because we have been staying away from the big cities where we were more likely to have found them.”

The train moved forward at the customary speed of thirty-five miles an hour. Inside the cab, one ear tuned to the radio and the other to the walkie-talkie coming from the rear cars. Marshall was still watching and asking questions about the operation of the train. As he studied the controls, he was also observing the gun car ridding out front. “It seems to me they are exposed to anything that might come our way” he wondered aloud. “Well” Mark said, “When we moved the flat car to the rear to help with the livestock it did leave them somewhat unprotected. Next yard we come to, we will replace it.” They were now approaching the burned area and slowed to a speed of fifteen miles per hour to ease any stress on the burned ties. As they passed the section of the missile it became apparent to them this was the first actual sign of combat. All they had seen up to this point was the aftermath. Kathy pulled her camera from its case shooting a few pictures of it as they passed by; she also noted the location on the map. Her journal plus the map that she highlighted as they progressed would make an excellent historical record for years to come of who, what, when and how things had come to be.

Back in the highrailer Steve called to Wes, “better start slowing up we have Newcastle coming up in about two miles.” Checking it on the atlas, Wes announced it was twenty five hundred people.” Hope it is a small peaceful place.”

The truck was easing to a stop and Steve climbed out to line a switch. Ryan gave the small yard a quick once over, determining that it was safe the trio proceeded to examine the building for maps and keys that would be useful for the trip. Wes positioned the highrailer near a fuel pump. He was pulling the bolt cutters from the toolbox as the sound of the approaching train became clear. Within a few moments, the train had stopped for fuel and sand. With the passengers dismounting to stretch their legs, some of the people were moving about the yard opening cars to checkout the cargo as others went to the rear to feed and water the livestock.

Newcastle yard was located about a mile from the town. The primary industry for it was textile production. By its appearance, the factory near the yard had been closed for sometime. The windows boarded and weeds in place of grass gave sign that hard times had fallen up this small town. Like so many places the train had passed through the area was undamaged in some sections and destroyed a few blocks away.

Ryan and Matt moved up the street leading into the heart of the town checking for any signs of life. The sight was familiar in some respects but also gave evidence to what had been a chaotic final few moments of life for some. Several vehicles were jammed together in a struggle for a position on the outbound street. As they scoped the south portion, Robert and Joey worked their way into the north region. The smell of death and decay was not as strong as previous places perhaps because of the time that had elapsed or the fact they were used to it by now. Human and animal remains were present but not in the volume expected for a town of this size. Both parties satisfied the location was safe returned to the train to report. As the group, assembled information exchanged on supplies needed and the weather that was showing signs of storm. Jeff pointed out that from the time of departure from Texas to present rain had not fallen in sizeable amount. In his opinion, a bad storm was on its way. Others agreed fearing the rain might cause chemicals or other products from the war that was

now airborne to be deposited on the ground. Uncertain of what may fall from the sky the plan was to look for a safe place to hole-up for a short time. The two scout units returned to the town to find suitable quarters not only for the people but for the livestock as well. As they dashed forward, the remainder of the party began the task of removing needed material. Marshall dismounted the horses from the car and began to saddle them. Wes positioned the highrailer to allow its boom to offload bales of hay plus sacks of feed. As this action unfolded, in the train Marci with Blanca behind her coordinated the kitchen activities while Tami was working out the details for sleeping bags and bedding. Alan worked to start a large truck setting near the yard tower. In typical fashion tasks were being taken on with no one giving orders, each person seeing what needed to be done and taking it upon themselves.

The scout teams returning with exciting information about what they believed was the perfect location. Matt broke down the plan. "We can use the elementary school." he went on in detail. "Most of the windows are intact in the south section. Classrooms will make good holding pens for the stock with the hall as a common access point for feeding and such. In addition, the cafeteria has working propane so all we need to move is food and water. This brought a loud whoop of excitement from Marci and Blanca who were trying to decide what equipment to take.

Marshall with the aid of several students had worked the stock to a holding area. "We can do a cattle drive up the street into the hallway and sort them upon arrival. We only have four saddles for the eight horses so it looks like bare-back time or just four riders." Kathy hopped on the back of a paint mare and said, "I was riding my donkey Poncho when I was six so this works for me." She grabbed the rein pushing the mare to the right in an attempt to keep the herd in check. Marci not to be outdone mounted a chestnut following suit. Dana climbed aboard and with a grin said, "My ancestors always rode bare-back" Joey wanting to look good for Christa took a horse with a saddle. In the back of his mind, he thought, "I'm from Pittsburg what the

hell do I know about ridding” Reaching down he asks her if she wanted to ride with him.

“Do you know what you are doing?”

“You bet.”

“Alright then, but if you dump me I will never speak to you again”.

She stepped on to the platform as he guided the horse to her. Taking hold of his arm and swinging her leg over sliding onto the rear. Angela who like her aunt Kathy had been ridding from childhood took the last saddle. The drovers began to work the cows and remaining horses in the direction of the school with the goats following behind in no real hurry. Barbara was left in the boxcar due to the hard time handling him, posed a concern if the rain brought bad fallout. The decision made that if it were bad enough to hurt him in the car it would most likely hurt everyone in the building. The other stock could use exercise and a break from the crowded railcars. The playground provided a perfect coral with the grass and chain link fence. The stock grazed as desk and other furniture moved from classrooms making space for them, piled in the hallway to prevent access into the damaged portion of the building. Bales of hay followed by buckets of water secured the rooms for the stock when the sun went down.

As the animals were being cared for, the cafeteria came to life in preparation for the evening meal. Gas stoves began to heat water in large containers for cooking and bathing. Dinner tonight promised to be more than the usual bill-of-fare cooked on grills. Sister Carol no longer needed to encourage the students to do their fare share of the work; they jumped in at a moments notice working hard at any task that they felt comfortable undertaking. She had mention to Tami and Marci how they made her proud at the speed they adjusted to things and mature they had become through this ordeal. Sara and Christa peeled potatoes as Amber and Tiff opened cans of tomatoes, green beans and corn. Dana came in from the outside to offer assistance only to see

things working at the pace of a full-scale restaurant. "Can I help with anything?" Marci answered, "You can make some coffee and tea that's about all that is left right now." Soon the smell of bread and pies baking found their way down corridors causing early birds to drift in and want a sample. Only to be chased away by a Marci waving a wooded spoon.

Matt was pushing a book cart as Wes stacked CO2 extinguishers on it to cool tonight's drinks. With the pair moving from room to room, they kept an eye out for other items that may be of service. When they entered the gymnasium, a broad grin spread over each face. Wes looked at Matt saying, "We haven't played in a long time." "It seems like a lifetime"

"Well, tonight the games begin"

"Oh! Yeah!"

In the distance, the sound of thunder began to rumble. Marshall along with his two sons rushed to the front door propping them open. Other people followed to help in bringing the stock inside before the storm arrived. Horses occupied the first three rooms with cows filling the remaining four along the second grade hallway. The sound of thunder began to grow intense as a light shower of rain tapped against the windows of the cafeteria. It was the first storm of any consequence since the war had started. With everyone inside and lanterns standing ready to providing light the evening meal now spread out on the tables in a picnic manor. Marci announced that there would be fresh pies for desert so leave room for them. Always looking for an opening Mark spoke up.

"Did you make them?"

"I made a few of them"

"Well, be sure and mark yours so we will know if we need any *Pepto*."

She threw a biscuit at him saying, "Well none for you buster".

Steve looked at Kathy and said, "I wonder if she meant pie". Taking an elbow to the ribs from Kathy, "Now be nice" she joked. Matt and Wes stacked the CO2 extinguishers at the ready to cool off the case of Cokes and jugs of tea. The meal now in full progress consisted of a broad assortment of foods taken from the train as well as the school storage room Blanca had discovered. With thirty-seven people now in the assemblage, cooking for and keeping supplies on hand became a constant chore. The opportunity to prepare a meal on something other than the grills gave the cooking crew a chance to pull out all the stops. On this night, they really outdid themselves.

Kathy with camera in hand moved to a position in effort to capture the group and the surroundings for her journal. Taking several shots at various locations, she documented not only the people but also the environment in which they were living. In these photographs, however, the faces had smiles and broad grins. This was a contrast to recent ones showing the strain of work and uncertainty that had become common in the recent weeks. She told Steve as they settled in for the night, "the last time we looked this happy as a group was when we were at the motel."

The meal now winding down Wes stood up on his chair drawing the attention of the room. He reported that Matt and he had found the equipment room for the gym and that they challenged anyone to a game of two on two. A roar of approval went up as two of the high school boys promised not to hurt them in a game of twenty-one. Moving to the gym laughter filled the hallway and bets made on the final score. Robert said he was giving twenty to one that the students beat them by six or better. Once inside an array of equipment lay on the floor. A badminton set brought forth a new set of challenges, a soccer game called for in the third grade hall. "This is just what we need right now" Steve told Mark as he opened a pack of small cigars. Marci came to sit by them on the bleachers asking if they were, such a bunch of old farts that they weren't going to play. "Well", her husband replied, "as you know I was a rodeo man in school".

“Yes! And you still think eight seconds is a good ride.”

“Don’t want to wear it out all at once, save a little for the future”

“Go ahead; live on the edge she responded with a naughty giggle.”

Kathy came up taking a seat behind Steve rubbing his shoulders as she sat down. “So how about it she questioned?” “Well, were discussing the merits of rodeo when you came up” Steve answered leaning into her arms.

At the far end of the court, the high school boys were up by three as they received cheers from the newly appointed cheer squad. Closer the badminton game was a runaway as Jeff with Ryan were taking on anyone who would step on the court. Robert and Marsha took the challenge and a new game started with excitement as they scored two straight on the defending champions. The games continued until darkness forced the athletes to retire.

Outside the storm howled with rain hammering the school to the point that it considered by some to be a hurricane. The main body of people returned to the lunchroom to play a few hands of cards or chess by lantern light. Others called it a night taking sleeping bags to available rooms. Sister Carol ever vigilant of her charges kept a watchful eye on who was where. Later she sat next to Kathy and Blanca as they played an intense game of gin. She spoke with them in a low voice saying how she would forever be grateful for the action that saved them from certain death, but now she wondered aloud if they would ever see Pittsburg or any family again. Blanca looked into the nun’s face answering “I don’t know what we are going to find as we move along, but a part of me feels that with all of the large cities destroyed and the destruction of the small towns I doubt it would be worth the trip.” Kathy added,” even the radio recordings from the president have stopped and I’m not sure what to make of that.” She looked at the pair with acceptance in her eyes finally speaking again “I have six girls and four boys that are my responsibility and I just want to be sure that I do it right”. Kathy spoke as she looked across the room” take a good look at them they

may be seniors by the calendar but they are the future of this country perhaps the world. I feel if you sit them down and talk with them they may surprise you at how mature they are. Several of the boys have been put in some dangerous spots and two have even been shot, in addition, the girls have taken on a huge portion of the workload. It's true that the other young people here have parents to turn to for help and guidance but at the same time all of the adults are looking after them." "My advice" Kathy added "is to be straight with them and tell them what you expect, if it's sex that worries you tell them at this time and with the conditions we will be living in for the next while a pregnancy could be fatal. Remind them of the contamination and lack of proper medical facilities. Plus they have had proper upbringing and know what is the right thing to do." Sister Carol agreed and planned to talk with them tomorrow after breakfast.

The storm increased in intensity, the rain pounding the windows until they began to shake and the wind blew with such force that many were concerned if the roof would remain. Marshall with his sons walked the halls to check on the stock. Meeting Steve and Jeff at the collapsed portion of the building, they discussed how it was better to be inside than on the train at a time like this. "I hope this section holds out and has not been weakening too much," Steve said. They observed small rivulets of water in the hallway coming toward their feet." Looks like Mother Nature is cleaning up after the mess we've made of the earth" Jeff remarked as he checked the walls for strength.

As morning broke, the storm did not appear to lessen in fury. Rain with the wind at its back continued to pound the school. The group polished off breakfast and moved about the small section of building in awe of the force of nature at work just beyond the walls. Kathy and Blanca watched as Sister Carol gathered the young people in the corner of the lunchroom for her talk that she had practiced all night. "I hope it goes well for her," Blanca told Kathy" I know she is really worried about the

responsibility she has". After a few moments, the two women left the room hunting for their husbands.

Several people now gathered at the front of the school watching the rain come down in sheets with such force that visibility was limited to a few feet. The area visible was that of a street now evolved into a stream with a constant flow of assorted debris in a rapid pace. The question upon everyone's mind was will the train be able to continue? In the far section of the building water and wind began to take its toll on the burned section as the sound of collapsing material echoed down the halls. Marshall along with Mark moved to the main hall checking on the stock. The horses and cows remained in the rooms although it was apparent the conditions made them nervous. As the pair, working to ensure the stables would contain the stock they discovered the goats were missing. With the search, underway Mark recruited several people to help in the hunt. Sara came running down the hall and grabbed Mark by the arm saying, "I found two of them and you had better come fast". She led him to a first grade classroom where two of the goats grazed on a plastic container of crayons." What will happen to them", she asks. "Well they are nontoxic for kids to eat so I guess they will be alright, however we can expect some colorful poop in a few days." Sara laughed loudly saying, "I guess you're right about that". They ushered them down the hall to the room serving as a holding pen. The remainder of the herd rounded up as they wandered through out the building.

By noon the storm began to reduce in strength, plans made to return to the train and survey any damage. Wes and Mark took the highrailer to get a firsthand look at things while Marshall worked with the group preparing the stock for the walk back. Others stacked sleeping bags in addition to personal effects to be loaded for transport. Wes pulled to the main door about thirty minutes later telling everyone that all was secure and Mark stayed behind to fuel the locomotives. As the stock made its way down the street at a leisurely pace the riders commented to each other how the

sky had changed to the clear blue color it was before the war. "I can tell how the surroundings are cleaner now," Kathy said to Dana as she guided the cows back on to the trail. "Yes, I guess everything got a good washing last night", Dana answered.

The loading process took over an hour with the topic of discussion focusing on whether they should resupply now or push on to see what problems lay ahead due to the storm." Why not do it now while we are stopped", Wes suggested, "We know the town is empty?" The supply teams made list of needed items while Steve along with Wes, Mark and Mike searched for the National Guard unit. It was located on the far side of town and surrounded by trucks of all types. The most notable group consisted of Hemits used for heavy transport. As they entered the main building, Mike found a small office full of keys. Once again it was determined that at half of the unit had been deployed leaving the admin staff and a small operations force. The supply storage room displayed food, radio equipment, uniforms and mess gear. In the far corner as in, the other unit they had entered was a weapons vault. This one had limited weapons in storage. The team collected several M-16 rifles and one M2 50cal with tripod plus several side arms. However, the real prize was a fresh supply of ammo. Loading the truck, comments was made about the lack of usable material this trip had yielded." What I wish we could find was some heavy firepower", Wes stated" if we run into a well-supplied force even with the machineguns we could still be at a serious disadvantage. Grenades or a small artillery piece could give us a real edge". "I agree", Steve, said "but it seems like all we can find is shoulder-fired weapons". The crew began the return trip through town passing the VFW post on the way Mark slammed on the brakes and pointed at a WW2 cannon on display in the yard. "Do you think it would work he questioned." "I doubt if the breech would open", replied Wes "and if it did where could we find shells for it?" "Well it was just a thought" Mark replied as he put the truck into gear." Let's ask Robert when we get back he should be done in the sporting goods store by now" Mike said.

As the seemingly endless stream of supplies found its way on board the talk continued about the cannon in front of the VFW post. Robert admitted that the years of weather plus the ATF had most likely put an end to the life of the cannon.” However”, he said, “If you could find an old civil war muzzleloader, we might be able to make that work.” Steve spoke up, “if we used modern day powder in that wouldn’t it explode.”

“Yes, it would but most sporting good stores carry black powder for hunters and re-enactors. By getting the right grade and trial and error, we could make bags with the right charge to operate it. However, let me say right up front it is hard to aim and re-loading is slow at best, this would not be the primary weapon, you are looking for. We still need something that can pack a punch in a hurry. This Civil War type cannon would most likely fire grapeshot because actual rounds for it are going to be hard to find. It would be a good defensive piece when we get to Biltmore because we will have fixed fortifications to help us”.

The task of preparing lunch and the final inspection of the train took up the next few hours but as everyone went about their jobs, the talk buzzed on the topic of how clean the air appeared.” Well”, commented Tami “with the traffic taken from the roads and the sky and industry has come to a halt; this is most likely how it was for our forefathers”.” Well” Jeff added as he filled his plate with a second helping of spaghetti, “it looks like to me the energy crisis, global warming and most of the other concerns we had, have all been solved by this crazy war. However, I would like to know what is going on out there”.” I know what you mean”, Robert added as he followed in line for seconds.” A little *Fox News* and the *Weather Channel* would be of a great help right now”. The conversation moved from person to person each expressing concerns about what may be in store for the survivors of a world gone mad.

CHAPTER 18

The *Lead Dogs* mounted up giving themselves the standard two-mile spacing. According to the signal map, it would be several miles before they would need to change tracks so Wes moved along at forty miles an hour. As they scouted the area, it was becoming more noticeable at the effect of last night's storm. Steve mentioned that even with so many things burned to a cinder, the amount of soot and ash was greatly reduced and the smell of death was not as prevalent. The crew paused to inspect a bridge over a small river. Upon approaching it, the sound of rushing water made its presents known. Wes stood beside Steve as they watched assorted items pass by in a rapid rate. "Well", Wes said, "the water is out of its banks but I don't think it will pose a threat to the crossing."

"You're right it would need to get up several more feet, but that says a lot about the amount of rain we had last night. Fore Pete's sake look at that!"

"Yep and its point away from us. How long do you think it is?"

"With our luck a hundred cars."

Wes waived Ryan forward to a point across the bridge. Showing him the stalled train Ryan replied, "Well at least we didn't hit it in the rain." According to the map the next double track would be at mile marker 218.6 the train sat two hundred yards from the crossing put it about a mile and a half to the switch.

"Well when the train gets here we can take the highrailer and go the rear to start breaking it up."

"Should one of us stay behind to help them?"

“No, they have plenty of help on board. As a matter of fact, we could take a few from them to help out.”

As Jeff guided the engine to a halt, Steve mounted the cab and began to explain. “I make it a little over a mile and a half to the siding switch and it’s down hill from here according to the profile in the book. We could use a couple of extra hands”. Mark called to the rear, within moments three young men with rifles over their shoulders stood at the bottom waiting orders. “Climb on guys we are going to do a little railroading for the next hour or so”. Wes dropped the highrailer off the tracks and they proceeded to the rear hoping it would be a short train. As the crew pulled up and began to dismount Wes briefed the new people on how to bleed air and break cars while Ryan and Steve drove down the track to line the switch in preparation to receive the cars. “Let’s have a look on down the track”. Steve suggested as they entered the cab of the truck after the switch was in place. The pair moved down the track for another mile when a lake came into view on their right. “This would be a good place to collect fresh water for the stock”, Steve offered. The truck eased to a stop with Steve stepping from the cab walking toward the lake in search of a low spot to reach the water. A voice from the brush spoke in a commanding tone. “Just hold it right there and keep your hands where we can see them!” Steve responded to the order, as he raised his hands another person appeared from the other side of the track advising Ryan to do the same. Four men all armed with shotguns surrounded them. Steve spoke.

“We mean you no harm; we are just passing through the area on our way east.”

“How far east?”

“Several hundred miles to North Carolina.”

“Really, what is there for you?”

“A safe haven and family. If you want, we will turn around and leave right now.”

"You swear you are not with the group down the track"

"I don't know about anything down the track"

"Can you prove that?"

"Well I can show you a Texas driver's license, and if you look inside of the truck, you will find maps and charts that show our route to here".

"What was the last town you passed through?"

"Well we weathered out the storm in a town called Newcastle."

As they spoke, Steve noticed one of the men looking inside the truck and then stepping back with amazement. The man moved beside the leader and in a whisper, he said "they have enough firepower in there to out gun us; it looks like a squad of Marines." The leader told him to verify the paper work and to see if he could find proof of the story. Steve spoke up and suggested that while they searched the truck perhaps everyone could sit down so the tension would be somewhat relaxed. The leader motioned to a spot on the bank and told them to sit. Another man joined him on guard as a second on started looking inside the truck. Steve pulled a small cigar from his pocket and offered it to the leader," it won't be long until they will be to stale to smoke" he said. The man stepped forward taking it at the same time he introduced himself as James. Lighting up the smoke he said "I hope you are who you say you are but I want you to know I will shoot you without reservation if need be." Steve responded, "As I said we are trying to get to North Carolina if you want we will back up and go around. But could you tell what the big deal is about down the track?"

James began, "there is a man in a small settlement three miles away who has proclaimed himself as the new president of the U.S. He has ordered everyone to report to him with all males to be conscripted into his army to put down anyone who questions his command. I am with a group of people who will not knuckle under to him. So he has us cornered on a small point on the lake and is trying to starve us out,

in addition snipers pick off anyone trying to go for help or bring in supplies. If you are who you say you are, we saved your life and you could be our ticket out of here.”

“What I told you is the truth”, Steve answered “and when you see the train, you will have any doubts removed. You are welcome to join us or travel with us as far as you like. We have picked up many survivors along the way and encountered small towns rebuilding and some under siege. However, we have always helped the good American people trying to do the right thing”.

The pair completed the search of the truck stepping to James reporting that everything appears in line with the story.” My question one of them asks was where did you get the firepower?” Steve answered, “Some of it came from police departments and some from National Guard Buildings plus we picked sporting good stores of supplies when ever we could”. James now told all concerned to relax. Now Steve stood up and with Ryan at his side waived down the track with both hands. James questioned him about this action. Steve replied, “When we didn’t return in a timely manor a patrol was sent out to check on us. You have been in the crosshairs of about a dozen scopes for the last twenty minutes. Now how can we help you and your group?”

Steve sent Ryan back to inform the train what was going on, and why nothing was moving. One of James’s men, Dave went with him to help answer any questions. The remaining four men moved in a stealth manor toward the shore of the lake. When they were in position James pointed out the predicament they were in.

“We are on that point with water on the majority of our sides and the land portion is full of snipers both ours and theirs. Them trying to kill off as many of us as needed to force surrender and us trying to make our way our.”

“What about crossing the lake at night?”

“They patrol it with canoes and flat bottom boats so we can’t hear them. On a few nights, they have even fired into our camp to terrorize us.”

“How many boats do you have?”

“Twelve assorted types: powerboats, party barges and even some small fishing types.”

“The area from the shore of the point to the bank of the track is about one hundred yards. Can your boats make a dash for it under covering fire?”

“Even if we succeed, they will be after us in moments, snipers, and patrols number about fifty in this area alone, and what would be coming from the town if we try to make it down the track they will cut us off at the next highway crossing.”

“Well when you meet my team, you will see planning like never before.”

“Send one of your men back to tell the folks we are coming to their aid and to sit tight for a day. Bring the other guy along to the briefing so he can return with the plan.”

“Done!”

James turned to the man closest to him, and said, “Make your way back, and tell them help is on its way.” The man left in a trot with a broad grin on his face. The trio began its trek to the truck and on to the train.

Upon arrival they found Dave with a plate full of food and eating like there was no tomorrow. He stood as James along with Wayne entered the site. He exclaimed, “These folks are all right!” “I guess so”, James answered as he looked at the surroundings.

With the train stopped for an indefinite amount of time, lunch was underway and everyone was moving about taking care of details. Several of the young men had carried water to the livestock and several of the women were in the cars selecting food boxes for the galley car.

Kathy came to Steve speaking to him in the tone he knew all too well. “Well once again you could have gotten your ass killed! **And if you get killed**, I am never going to speak to you again!”

"Yes, I know but someone has got to be up there checking things out."

"We need to restock supplies soon especially drinking water."

"Next town we can find we'll plan on stopping for a few days."

"How many people are going to join us", she questioned.

"Could be sixty or so".

"Steve, how can we transport and feed that many?"

"I don't know but we can't leave them behind; they are in the worst jam of anyone so far."

In a small clearing near the train, the group gathered and received a briefing from James on the current situation of things. "We are not able to hold out much longer" he said "and they know it so they are keeping pressure on us but not like before. Just enough to let us know we are at their mercy and they can take us anytime they want."

Wes looked at the train maps showing the terrain of the land in relationship to the tracks. He said, "What we need is a diversion to keep them busy for a long time while we make an evacuation and move some miles on the track." Mark suggested that the train be located on the track of the escape route before any fireworks started. It was decided to move the train back to the next branch line and send a detail down this track for several miles to ensure clear passage and proper switch alignment. Marshall, Matt and Joey who had all worked in the highrailer volunteered to move ahead on the plan. "If we engage them, in an all-out gunfight, some of us will be killed and many of the ones trying to make it from the point could be killed on the boats." Steve stated. Wes followed up with, "we need to make them suck in and expect an attack so they will not pursue us." "What about the fort", Steve asks; James replied, "It is mostly made up of sandbags, timber and scrap steel with the exception of the railroad track and the roads that are blocked by school buses and large trucks, which can be moved if they want to exit by the tracks or highway." "It is like the Alamo.

Unless we have artillery we can't breach it except at that point and will be too costly." "No", Steve responded, "As Wes said we need them to suck in and expect an attack not actually take the town." Kathy who had been sitting by Steve said, "In the western movies they would stampede cattle into the town to create a diversion." "Go on" Steve prodded. "Well if you pushed a few railcars down the track, they would wonder what you were up to." "Good thinking!" Wes said. "What is on the stalled train that we were going to clear?" he said looking at Steve. "Oh! I know what you are thinking" Steve answered with a broad grin. "Here is the plan and see how everyone likes it. The town has two tracks running into it blocked by vehicles. If we put a heavy car on the end to smash through and keep on going, the follow up cars could contain chemicals or highly flammable material." Robert jumped in at this time adding, "If I pepper them with the fifty-cal, they will explode and create havoc like they have never seen." James looked at the group and said, "thank God you are on our side." Mark and Jeff were watching the plan unfold nodding their heads, with Robert on the gun car and second car with supporting fire we can enter the hot zone and withdraw the people." The two engines were broken apart, the gun car fitted the one, and a second car placed in the front the remaining engine. Inside the second car was the two M60's plus several people armed with the M16's taken from the National Guard units. Robert and Ryan had recruited two of the students to assist them in keeping ammo feed to the guns. The second car was in preparation as James sent another runner back to the group tell them "when the fireworks start I want everyone on a boat and out of there ASAP and not to bring a lot of stuff we will resupply later."

The next task was going to take creativity to a new level. First, the stalled train was going to be broken up into three cuts of cars the two for use as the assault sections with the third placed out of the way for the attack and the retreat. When all of the switching was completed, a weary group stood ready. The section driven by Mark consisted of a flatcar loaded with the frame of a 797 CAT dump truck. "These trucks a

so large they are shipped in sections and assembled at the mine sites” Alan said.

“When completed they are the size of a three story house.” Behind the flat were two tank cars of Anhydrous Ammonia, followed by two carloads of Liquefied Natural Gas. Mark moved the gun car in position standing ready for the action to begin. Jeff walked back to the engine after checking over his *train of excitement*. His make up consisted of a flatcar of the large tires to fit the 797 followed by two cars of Anhydrous Ammonia and for ignition purposes two tankers of benzene, according to the DOT book this was highly flammable. As he positioned the second gun car he checked to ensure the couplings did not latch,” once I get the mess rolling I don’t want to be pulled down the track with it” he said to Mark as they climbed into the respective locomotives. The plan was to accelerate to forty miles per hour and release the cars about three hundred yards from the barrier as the trains approached, the gun cars would saturate the area with heavy fire allowing the rescue operation to begin. Behind each of the engines were two empty boxcars for the refugees to pile into as quickly as possible. Between the gunfire and the rolling freight cars, the enemy may not be able to respond in time and would be overwhelmed.

The radio crackled to life as the highrailer reported the line was clear for ten miles and they would be standing by. “Well”, Steve said, “this is it” to Wes as he lit a small cigar taken from his shirt pocket. Looking at it, he remarked, “it won’t be long and these things won’t be fit to smoke.” “Let’s rock and roll” Wes answered. The teams took assigned positions as the trains began to pull out side by side. Building speed, the pair rolled forward toward the planned pick up point. As they approached, James fired a signal flare to advise the people on the point to start loading the boats.

In the surrounding area, the snipers and patrols held their fire in surprise of the action-taking place around them. At last, the trains had reached the point of release and the cut of cars were freewheeling toward the barricades. No one had fired a shot at either of the trains to this point. The shock had passed now, and the patrols

began to fire at Mark's train, followed by random fire at Jeff's unit. Both gun cars went into action now with devastating results on all areas around the track. Robert held fire as he concentrated on the tank cars approaching the town. As he held his gaze on them, the sound of the two gun cars in action was that of a platoon of Marines in combat. The cars were laying down incredible fire on anything that moved or could provide shelter for the enemy. Watching from Jeff's engine James signaled to Wes that the boats were leaving the shore in route to the trains. Mark moved closer as Robert readied the M2 for action. At the three hundred yard range, he signaled and Mark prepared to reverse when the explosions started. The cars hit the barricades within thirty seconds of each other, crashing through like a hot knife in butter. The cuts of cars carried into the town another two hundred yards before stopping entangled in the rubble that had once been busses and trucks. Robert now signaled to Mark as he fired a short burst into the Natural Gas car sending it up in a fireball that encompassed the benzene car on the adjacent track. Those on board the trains could feel the shockwave, and the explosion was the most deafening sound that anyone could imagine. Both cuts of cars were about twenty-five feet apart at their final resting place. Robert put a few rounds into the second car for good measure but Mark had already started to pull away in a huge hurry. Everyone on each side paused for a few seconds dumb founded by the sight of a huge yellow and orange fireball wrapped in black smoke twisting like a tornado into the sky. The height rose about three hundred feet in

a matter of seconds.



Many of those in the area surrounding the tracks dropped their weapons running into the woods fearing what would be next. The boats from the point were travelling at flank speed approaching the banks. Now with the firing stopped they hurried to the boxcars piling inside with shouting voices rich in the air. Wes had moved to the cars helping with the loading and advising Jeff when to begin the return trip. Few people boarded Mark's cars as he was still returning from the fire mission. Watching from the gun car with Robert, Steve said, "That should keep them occupied for a bit!"

"Yep, and if they don't leave soon the ammonia cars will finish the job"

"Well I guess the self-appointed president just got relieved from his duties"

"Most likely, he relieved himself in other ways."

With the trains, now traveling in full reverse the radio chattered with reports of the mission. Jeff was telling the main body of the train that they would be arriving in less than five minutes; the plan was to connect to the main section moving out as quickly as possible. The refugees would need to stay in the boxcars for several miles

into the safe zone cleared by the highrailer. As the connections were almost complete, a large sonic boom roared through the air causing each person to turn toward the town as if on a cue given by a movie director. James turned to Steve "What in the Hell was that"

"It was most likely the ammonia tanks going up in a BLEVE"

"A what?"

"A BLEVE is short for Boling Liquid Expanding Vapor Explosion or as we in the railroad call it, Blast Levels Everything Very Effectively in other words the pressure in the tank cars reached a point where the tanks couldn't hold it back any longer. The product ruptures the tank and in some cases, the tank cars can be propelled for up to a mile like a ground style rocket or they can even go airborne for a great distance."

"So, the cars in the town exploded like a large bomb!"

"You got it, if the fire didn't get them and the explosion didn't, the ammonia will."

"I sure am glad you are on our side!"

Kathy walked over to where the two men were talking. Still looking at the cloud of smoke, she asks, "You planned that also didn't you."

"Yes baby we did."

James told her "I just said to Steve I am glad that you are on our side."

Looking at him she said, "As they say don't mess with Texas"

The three began to laugh loudly and Wes strolled into the mix. "Glad we moved out as fast as we did, I haven't seen a BLEVE like that in my whole career as a firefighter."

"What so funny anyway", he questioned. Steve answered, "Kathy is just waxing philosophic."

Now more anxious than ever to get moving before the wind changed direction. The train pulled out with the intention to make the ten miles and meet the highrailer as quickly as they could. Steve and Wes climbed into the boxcar holding the

most of the rescued people. They started to explain, at the first location the train would stop and get things organized to a more comfortable setting. Several of the people yelled their thanks for the group coming to their aid and others chimed in with a heartfelt "God bless you". "With any luck, we can find a town to stop in soon" Wes started "there we can resupply with all of the things we need." Questions began coming from the people about where they were going and what was going to happen to them. Steve responded by asking if they would all be patient until they could meet as a group and then everything would be covered.

The train lumbered on and the freight car was not the smoothest riding place to be. People bumped around until they finally conceded to stay put for the duration of the trip. As the two men talked with the new travelers they began to look around and take notice of the new addition of faces to the traveling band of people moving into the world of uncertainty. It was easy to see that this group could not have held out much longer against the opposition. Most looked tired and weary; all appeared half-starved.

James made his way along with another man to sit near the two as they spoke to the people while bumping along. "Guys this is Troy", he said as they dropped to the floor. "Troy this is Wes and Steve." "Thanks for getting us out of a bad spot back there" Troy began. "No problem", Wes answered.

"Well the two of us were selected to represent the group."

"How can we help you", Steve questioned.

"What is your plan for surviving this madness and what plan do you have in mind for us."

"Well, let us start from the beginning." The two explained the plan the original group had made. In addition, how they had been picking up people along the journey. They did not go into the bloody details of the battles but did mention that along the way many areas are under control of roving bands of outlaws. After explaining how their system worked with further details on resupply and movement. James and Troy

admitted aloud that they were impressed. "As for part two of your question" Steve said, "your group is welcome to join us or we will drop you off at any location you desire." Troy now reached for one of the cigars Steve was pulling from the small box in his pocket. "Do you mind", he asks.

"No, help yourself. It's not as if I buy them", he grinned, "and soon they will be too dry to smoke anyway." He said, "I must admit there is strength in numbers and every group is going to need to pool their talent to survive."

"Here is a thought for you, at the next town that we can stop for supplies. Why not have a group meeting and discuss it in private chambers from our group. We would welcome any people who would like to continue with us. When we left Lindsey, about one hundred and thirty people stayed behind and Marshall brought his family with us."

"Sounds like a good idea."

The radio clipped to Wes's belt called out for the two of them to meet at the front of the train as it eased to a stop. "Why don't the two of you join us?" Wes suggested. "Sounds good" James replied. With the train, slowing to a stop the slack in the cars began to run in causing a strong jolt to pass from one car to another. The new passengers were not used to this and found themselves sprawling across the floor. "It's better to stay still until everything stops", Steve cautioned. The four men jumped from the car moving through the ballast to meet with the group in the front engine. As they passed the Amtrak cars Kathy stuck her head out the window asking if it would be a long stop. "I'm not sure", Steve answered "but I'll let you know"

"Well we want to get some food for the people in the back."

"I'll keep you posted."

James looked toward Steve; "they are fixing food for us?" "They figured it had been a long time between meals, so they probably whipped up something to tie everybody over till we stop for the evening."

Mark and Jeff climbing down from the lead engine parked behind the highrailer, met the men. "This is as far as we got in checking the track", Matt reported. "You men did a great job in clearing the way for our escape", Steve replied slapping him on the shoulder. "We could hear the explosions from here", Matt exclaimed.

"Well it will be along time before they start a fight with anyone", Wes said pulling the maps from the front seat of the truck. "Jason will you do me a favor", Steve ask?

"Sure, what do you need?" "Go back to the car and tell Kathy we are going to be here for a bit." "On my way," he yelled over his shoulder dashing down the track. Looking at the signal map and the road atlas Mark said "I think Canton will be the next stop for us after we by-pass Jackson." "I know that town", James said stepping forward and pointing. "The railroad will pass over Fulton St. and you can take it almost anywhere you need to go." "Great" added Wes "we finally get to stop in a place where we have a guide. Why don't you men take a break from the highrailer and get some food and rest, all of you did a good job," Wes said to the crew. "We will take in from here."

"Thanks", Wes the young men said moving toward the rear. Steve looked at James and Troy "if you want one can ride with us and the other can ride in the lead engine. Troy said he would take a spin in the train because when he was a kid he always wanted to do that. Ryan shouldered the M60 and said, "Come on baby, we are going to be the lead dogs again" patting the barrel.

The highrailer moved out for the ten minute spread between the train James began to observe the maps and signpost, commenting on how smoothly things were going. "It hasn't always been this easy we struggled at first but now everyone has fallen into a routine and it works well. We switch places to give each other a break and try to keep the crew in the gun car in from the weather when we are away from towns." Steve explained. Wes pointed to the map and the mile marker," it looks like we are about a mile out." I hope it is still standing and peaceful," Steve said shouldering his weapon and starting up the track. Wes readied for the task of providing cover as

Ryan stood by the door pulling ammo belts from the floor.” What should I do”, James said feeling a bit left out. “Take this rifle and move up with me if need be”, Ryan answered.

CHAPTER 19

Steve paused at the edge of town looking for a vantage point to see as much of the area as possible. Picking a rise covered with small trees, he worked into position. From this, point most of Canton was burned rubble however, he did locate something that was sure to make everyone rejoice. From this view, the silver finish of an Amtrak train sat at the depot. Heavily covered in soot but in his mind Steve thought if only a few cars are useable, we will be far ahead of where we are now. Wes moved into position beside him observing the lay of the land. “Look”, Steve said pointing in the direction of the depot, “we may have hit pay dirt. I hope so, it’s going to be very crowded if we don’t turn up something soon.” They worked back to the highrailer and called for the train.

The depot secured and Steve had checked over the cars as Jeff guided the train onto the yard. People dismounted stretching and talking as they gathered on the remains of the platform. Kathy along with Blanca and Tami moved briskly toward the men glancing at the passenger cars over their shoulders. Steve grinned at them saying the cars although ugly were useable, “I checked them out first thing. No bodies on board, everyone apparently dismounted and ran for cover when things went bad. The compartments still hold baggage and yes girls the galley car has food on board but it has gone bad so it will need a good cleaning.” “We can do that in short order”, Blanca, announced as they began making plans on the spot. “Wait for a moment”, Steve suggested, “first with the new people our population has grown sizably and we

may want to assign work details so everyone is not wandering around not sure what to do.” “Alright Boss” Kathy said “what’s’ first”. “Now I’m not the boss, I just think it is going to take more organization than before. Let’s get the group into a building and work out things.” As they were talking, James came to the platform saying, “I have asked all of the people to meet at the far end of the platform so we can get things in order.” “Great” Steve answered, “I will come down and we can get the show on the road.” Standing on a bench so that everyone could see him, Steve addressed the assemblage. “First, let me say that we are glad to have all of you with us. We need to resupply on almost everything. Our group has been traveling for quite a distance and we have worked out a good routine to handle this. So, what we would like to do is form several work parties for various tasks and after each is completed the new arrivals can do some shopping for personal supplies. James said that he has been to this town before is there anyone else familiar with the area?” Several hands went up throughout the crowd. “Great let’s get together now. As we are doing this, we need several volunteers to check out the railcars for anything we can use.” Hands went up again. “Could we get the new arrivals to meet with Kathy sometime during the day in order to collect information? Also, would several of the new arrivals meet with the cooking unit and help make a food supply list. If we could adjourn for a moment, I would like to meet with the ones familiar with the area. By the way, I am not the leader I am just the one with the biggest mouth and asked to speak.” A loud laughter erupted and Steve said, “James would like to say a few words.”

James moved to the bench and spoke in a loud clear voice. “The first thing I would like to say on behalf of those of us stranded at Cedar Point is a heartfelt thank you!” A loud cheer rose from the refugees. “Next, this group has survived all the way from Texas by pooling their talents. Moreover, team work so we should join in and do our share. A group of us discussed the length of stay at this location and we estimate three days. With this in mind, living quarters is a priority that is being handled as we

speak but for the time being, we will meet here at the depot. Any questions so far.” No one raised their hand. “All right let’s go to work.”

Wes and Mark were locating the phonebooks and local maps as Steve and James were speaking. Now they motioned the two men over to the table. Jeff followed by Ryan joined them Troy rounded up the others that had raised their hands expressing knowledge of the town. “OK, the first thing we need is to find shelter for the next few days”, Steve began. A fellow named Pete said stepping forward. “There is a *Hampton Inn* at Soldier near Colony Rd. it probably has a hundred rooms in it,” he began. “Well Pete,” Mark responded, “it most likely has a lot of decomposing corpses in it. We found that out the hard way.” “But you are on the right track”, Jeff added, noticing the hurt look on Pete’s face. “What we need is a place that has kitchen and bath equipment but was not occupied at the time. At our last stop, we stayed in a local elementary school.” Pete looked up with a smile and said, “I can take you right to one.” “Good job”, Troy said “how far away from here.” “Not far” Pete grinned. “All right Pete,” Troy said “take a detail a go check it out.” Alan stepped into the meeting asking, “Do you want us to start securing trucks for hauling supplies.” “Please do,” Steve, answered “as many as you can.” Alan turned to the new faces asking who knows where a *U-Haul* and a truck or car dealership is.

“I can help you with that”, a woman’s voice came from the back.

“All right, we need to round up a few drivers and get started.”

“How far to the car lot?”

“About one mile”

Marshall moved into the crowd looking for Steve. He wanted to know about a place for the livestock. Turning to Pete Steve asked, “Is there a playground or fenced in ball field.”

“Yep! We can handle that too.”

“Marshall, Can you find some help to handle the stock?”

James jumped in; “we have several farmers in our group that would be glad to help out let me get them for you.” With that, he moved away from the group calling out for Tom, Mike and others. Troy looked at the train crew.

“Livestock.”

“Yep! I will tell you the story later.”

The teams searching the railcars were back with their report. Several cars were full of corn others contained fuel but the bulk of the freight was items that were not needed. Jeff took several people to help and they began the task of moving the cars to add to the train. The operation was coming together in a smooth fashion, even better than expected. A detail had cleaned the *Amtrak* cars of baggage and food articles. These were now ready to add to ever-growing train.

Alan pulled into the lot followed by five others driving flatbeds and pickups. “We stopped at the car lot first”, he grinned, “thought we might need hotel transportation before supplies.” Troy shook his head and said, “He could ferry some people to the school to help Pete get ready for tonight’s guest.” “Sure just load them up and point the way.” The woman named Joann that had taken them to the car lot said, “I know where it is at, and gather up the group.” “Also”, Steve added, “Marshall will need help in taking the stock and supplies there it sounds like we will do the same setup as Newcastle.” “Gotcha covered”, he shouted as he headed off to find Marshall. “You guys really are organized”, Troy, remarked speaking to no one particular. Mark replied, “We have been getting a lot of practice.” “Now” Steve said looking up from the map, “we need sleeping bags and camping gear for the school in addition to a report on the condition of the kitchen.” Wes looked across the small table holding the maps and said, “I guess a visit to the fire station would be in order.”

“Yes, I guess it would.”

“I’ll take Matt, Joey and one of the locals.”

“Good plan.”

With that, he left the platform finding the two boys and securing a driver for the trip. Tami and Blanca moved to the planning table asking if any food stores had been located yet. "Not yet but we better get started on that, and checking out the school, no one has come back to tell us what it looks like over there." As they were speaking, Marshall came by moving the stock up the street with the aid of his sons and a few others. Behind them, a pickup loaded with feed and other supplies. Waving as they passed Mark said, "It reminds me of the traditional cattle drive. Cowboys on horseback pushing a heard." Their attention drawn back to the job at hand when James came up and asked what jobs needed attention next." Let's go over the list", Steve said.

"Lodging "

"Check", replied Mark

"Stock out to graze"

"Check"

"Water supply"

"In progress"

"Railcars checked"

"Check"

"Engines serviced"

"Not yet"

"Food supply"

"Have team scouting for sources"

"Camping equipment moved to lodging site"

"In progress"

"Power sources for lodging"

"In progress"

"New clothing and hygiene supplies for Cedar Point group"

“Not yet”

“Armory and sporting good stores”

“Not yet”

“New railcars for supplies”

“In progress”

“Trucks to haul supplies”

“In progress”

“Well James it looks like between the two groups things are being done at a fast pace. We should go to the school and see what we can do.” Moving from the depot toward a pickup truck they paused as Jeff called out to them. “We should be finished in about an hour send the bus back for us.” “Will do brother”, Steve shouted back. “Bus,” Mark said with a question in his voice. “**Yep!** I noticed someone had started a school bus and was shuttling people around in it”, Steve answered. “This is what I mean about no one is the leader James, everyone seems to know what needs to be done and just jumps in and takes the job on. By the way, what is with Wes and the fire station?”

“He was a firefighter/paramedic in Texas and he has devised a way to use the fire trucks to supply water to wherever we stay for a extended time don’t ask me how but it works and he also collects the CO2 extinguishers for cooling drinks at mealtime.”

“Clever man to have around”.

“Yep, and he is our only medical person so I worry that something might happen to him. What types of talent do you have in your group?”

“My background is in electronics, Troy taught Physics and Chemistry at the local high school, Pete ran a small auto repair shop, and Jan is a Vet. Tech. for the animal clinic, Shirley is a nurse, Larry is a building contractor, and Ruth was in some

type of communication field. Juan is an electrician. The rest were farmers or worked in factories and a few are retired.”

“Sounds like you have a good of a mix as we do.”

The truck stopped in front of the school. At first glance, things looked normal with the exception of the stock grazing on the playground in addition to the broken windows and doors. As the four men walked into the building the view changed to what a first glance would be considered pandemonium, people were moving about carrying things to be discarded as other items were arranged for a designed use. Wes had pulled the fire hose from the cafeteria window across to the now pasture where it branched off to supply water for the animals later he planned to move it to the water inlet for the locker rooms. The hose continued down the street and out of sight. The kitchen was under attack by a squad cleaning and readying for the food arrival. Moving down the first hall room after room stripped in preparation for sleeping quarters. This would be the first time many of the group had slept indoors for weeks. As they approached the gym, the four men stopped and began talking, “James I guess you and Troy will want to meet in private with your group tonight and I think we should have a discussion among ourselves as well. I hope your people will want to come with us, but no hard feelings if they chose to go another direction.” “Same here the men replied.”

The large rental truck backed to the front door of the school followed by the bus. “We have been to the store and we will eat good tonight”, shouted one of the locals as she pushed up the door. A line formed as box after box passed from hand to hand on its way to the kitchen. As if on cue, Mike and Juan had completed the power hook up bringing light to the building. It took them several hours to turn off the switches and provide service only to the section of the building in use. Back in the galley, water from the fire hose brought to a boil for extra sanitary precautions and then poured into large cooking pots. Two men stood by the end table opening cans,

as they were stacked in front of them. "One thing is for sure we are having yams tonight because I have opened twenty cans of them." His partner operating the other opener said "and green beans as well." The men chuckled as they opened the cans pushing them to the end for pick up by the cooks. "I always hated school food and now it is going to be like a feast for a king." With the operations moving like a well-planned invasion in the cooking area, the dinning section now became the center of attention. Boxes of paper plates were torn open followed by plastic cups and utensils. Water was too precious for cleaning anything but the cooking equipment and there was an endless supply of paper and plastic items.

As the smell of the feast carried down the hall, piles of cots, air mattresses and sleeping bags lined one side with boxes of flashlights and lanterns on the other side. Under the trophy case, cases of hygiene products awaited pick up. "Sort of a self-serve motel lobby" Troy remarked as they walked by. The small children sent on the mission to round up everyone and bring them in for the meal. As ten year olds dashed down the halls, hungry and tired faces emerged from various rooms making their way to the best meal they had eaten in weeks.

Kathy met Steve at the bottom of the steps leading into the cafeteria. As the four men walked in. "one of the women from Cedar Point owned a small café. She told the usual cooking crew that we could have the night off if we wanted to, so we jumped at the chance of not cooking for a hundred people."

"Well how have you been occupying this free time."

"First I made family photos of all the new people and secondly I entered their skills into the ledger."

"You have been busy"

"Tami, Blanca, Marci and I inventoried all of the supplies on board the train. We concluded that it is going to take five times as much as our current stock to keep going."

“Then we had better clean out everything that this town has to offer.”

Large serving pans and trays held mountains of food with the variety that would make any Las Vegas buffet take a second rating. Canned hams were baked, canned chicken found its way into several casseroles; instant potatoes doctored with spices and vegetables to make the British style Sheppard's Pie, every type of appetite had something for it. Fresh bread, pizza and a variety of pies by using canned fillings and bread Wesh. Sarah along with several of the high school girls made thirty gallons of tea and ten of coffee accompanied by cases of drinks. At the end of the table stood Matt and Jason holding the extinguishers ready to chill any beverages upon request. The assemblage moved through the line with the excitement of kids in a mall to see Santa. Each person sat but no one was eating. James asked Jeff if he would bless this meal. Jeff stood on a chair, thanking God for bringing us this far and asking for a safe journey as we travel on. The food was prepared to the satisfaction of all.

With the meal, winding down James moved to the front of the room asking for everyone's attention. “In about fifteen minutes I would like to meet with the people from Cedar Point in the gym. I don't think this will take long, and after that let's all enjoy ourselves with the equipment found in the storage rooms or return to the cafeteria for some board games. What I am trying to say is we have been through a lot lately and we should enjoy ourselves tonight.” The people began to move to the door in small groups some still carrying plates of pie. As they cleared the room, the remaining group moved closer to form a circle around the table holding the tea urn.

“OK,” Steve began “we need to discuss our plans. Many if not all of the people from Cedar Point are going to join us. First, let say this to set the record straight. I am not in charge of this group, somehow I seem to do a lot of talking for us and I'm not sure how that happens. Some of you I have known from childhood and others I have met on this journey, but I can truly say I value each and every one of you. As our numbers grow, we are going to feel the need to establish some form of

government to live by. I would also remind all of us that it was politics and greed that has most likely started the madness we are in now. So I say simple government is the best government. Now I am going to shut up and let someone else talk.” Jeff spoke next, “I agree with Steve”, me to added Kathy.” One by one they all voiced agreement with the remarks made by Steve. “Now, the task at hand a simple style of government,” Tami offered the suggestion to use the old style town hall meetings. “We could elect a speaker for a two-year term and hold meeting on the first and third Sundays after church.” “Sure”, Mark piped in, “about three o’clock when we have all finished dinner we could meet to discuss the needs of our community.” “Good, good”, said Marci “first; I would like to suggest that we establish the by-laws to include the Constitution and the Ten Commandments.” “Absolutely!” Came from Wes “these are very important plus I would suggest that in a case that would be considered a capital offence that we use banishment as the form of punishment.” “Go on with that idea”, Blanca added. ,”if someone commits a crime that would call for a long prison sentence or the death penalty, they could be given a weapon one box of ammo, camping equipment and ten days supply of food. After they are escorted to the gate, they will be warned that if they are found in the area they will be shot on the spot.” “Sounds good to me”, Mark said, “lets vote on it.”

“Who will be allowed to vote”, Sarah questioned.

“What do you think is fair?” Jeff answered.

“Well I think seventeen would be good, because we have many people that age now that are fully functioning as members of the team.”

“Then it should be that way now”, Jeff replied, “Anyone disagree.”

No one did. “Then so be it “, Jeff said. “Now let’s vote on the bylaws. The motion carried by unanimous vote. “This is a good start”, Marci began; “we should work out the lesser details after we are settled.”

“Yes, that should lay the groundwork and let the others know that we are not going to be like the people from the other town.” Turning to Joey, Steve asked him to see how the other meeting was going “don’t sneak up them like a spy, make your presence known.” Christa said, “He always makes his presence know”, as she winked at him. Joey left the room blushing as the others broke into laughter.

In the gym, Troy was speaking and by appearances, lots of discussion was under way. “Chair recognizes Tom,” he said pointing at him.

Tom stood saying, “I’m for it. Look at how they have the train organized and to pull off our rescue was no small feat, plus look, how when we pulled into the town everyone went into action with no one giving orders each person was pulling their own weight. I like these people and my family and I have talked it over we want to go with them, I encourage all of you to do the same.”

“Thank you Tom, anyone else? Yes. Ruth.”

“I agree with Tom, every comment he made was right on the money, for my two cents worth. My question is how many of you have sat and talked with any of them for any lengthen of time? I ate lunch today with Sister Carol, you wouldn’t believe the story she told me of their rescue. How many of you even know that they were rescued, and the young black girl and Dana told me of the work they did at Lindsey. These are the surviving spirit of America and I want to be a part of them.”

“Who is next?”

“Me I guess”

“Chair recognizes Jan”

“We could talk about this all night but what it comes down to is a personal decision that must be made by each individual. They stated anyone that wants to come was welcome and anyone who didn’t they would help prepare for their journey. Folks it doesn’t get any better than that! Do you remember the last group we encountered? They had proclaimed a president and they were building a warlord style

government. After our rescue, these people made no demands and actually carried us away to a safe zone. I am going and can't imagine anyone not!"

"Anyone else?"

"Chair recognizes Pete"

"I agree with Jan let's get the groups together and talk. Afterwards we should let our hair down, enjoy ourselves a little, and eat more pie."

Laughter circulated the room with Troy asking for the meeting to be close for this section. Now pointing at Joey who had been sitting on the corner of a bleacher, "Tell your group to join us whenever they are ready." He left the gym relaying the message to everyone that had relocated to the cafeteria dining on pie and drinks.

"Alright who is going to present our information", Steve asked looking around the room.

"Why not you", Marshall answered.

"I think they have heard enough from me, someone else should represent the group for a change."

"How about Jeff he is use to public speaking"

"OK, I will if no one objects."

"Go for it," Mark said.

As they entered the gym, several of the students pushed book carts loaded with urns of tea and soft drinks followed by the ubiquitous extinguishers for cooling. Jeff walked to meet Troy on the basketball court. "We might as well have a few refreshments while we talk he grinned." Troy thanked him and said, "At this time the chair yields the floor to Jeff."

"Let me start by saying the group and I are glad to be here with you. It has been a long time since I stood before a congregation". "Well don't try to take up a collection," Wes shouted. Laughter rippled among the gathering. Jeff had given the line to him as an icebreaker. He went on to explain the results of the meeting offering

up the inconclusiveness of it to the fact that most people wanted to wait until we settle to work out the details. "However, what we have assembled now is not going to change. This is our firm belief in God and the USA." This statement brought applause from the entire assembly. "Could I open the floor to questions?" No one posed a single question. Jeff asked Troy if he would like to take the floor. Troy stood asking if the Cedar Point people wanted to meet again or was everyone satisfied. In the back, a voice boomed, I think we are finished. Troy observed heads nodding in agreement. "All right, then meeting adjourned and it is time for some well-deserved recreation."

The school divided into several sections. Providing sleeping quarters, the locker rooms were operational a several people chose to return for a second hot shower to relive sore muscles. In one portion of the women's locker room, hair styling was underway. For the women of Cedar Point it had been a long time between beauty shop visits, the supplies taken from *Shelia's Beauty Shop* were not going to be wasted. The younger crowd fired up a CD player and started a dance party. Still younger ones played kick ball on one section of the court as a few NBA wannabes tried a free-throw contest. Others returned to play cards in the cafeteria. By nine o'clock, the activities dwindled down as the workload of the day caught up to them.

After breakfast, the people gathered in a classroom. To plan the day's activities a whiteboard marked off with task needing attention. Robert with Pete along for directions volunteered to take a group to the National Guard Armory to see what they could salvage. Matt and Joey went about the chore of keeping the water supply in operation. Mike was checking the fuel on power supply. Wes, Jan and Shirley went on a mission to locate medical supplies throughout the town. The primary task at hand was to collect clothing, food and water. Pete rounded up necessary trucks and the old hands knew the drill. Some on forklifts at the storage locations others at the rail yard for car loading as a fleet of first-time truck drivers maneuvered everything from rental trucks to big rigs back and forth. Jeff ran the switcher engine as a team of three lined

switches and made up a cut of cars to be loaded. Kathy assumed her position to inventory each car keeping a wary eye on things in short supply. Marshall went to the local farm supply store with several of the locals. The men picked it clean of anything that may come in handy. Steve was driving a large wrecker pushing the street open to meet the needs of the ever-flowing truck traffic. The plan to use one street for traffic to the yard and one returning to the supply depot made more room for some of the inexperienced drivers to operate. As he pushed the remains of a mini-van on to the sidewalk, Robert pulled up waving for him to stop. The two men talked in the center of the street with Robert telling of the great find at the Armory. "They weren't fully deployed like the other places we went to before", he went on short of breath.

"Good stuff"

"More M-60's and M-16's but we found a large volume of ammo".

"What about heavy stuff?"

"This unit was primarily in transportation. We did find several trucks loaded with gear ready to move out, but I guess they got clobbered first. Two of the lowboys are carrying Bradley's we looked allover but there isn't any ammo for them."

"That's OK they will work as armored cars and offer a real mental edge to intimidate anyone who wants to attack us."

"Well then, we are going to load them as soon as one of us can figure out how to drive it"

"Good job guys, real good job".

Returning to the wrecker Steve thought well things are coming together. However, I sure wish we could make more progress on the move.

The evening brought the teams back to the school for dinner and reports on today's activities. "It looks like we could leave midday tomorrow if the train servicing is complete." Mark spoke up "we can be ready by then all we need is to join the cars run the air brake test".

"How about the kitchen and dining cars?"

"Ready", Kathy answered

"Does anyone else have any unfinished business?"

"OK we ship out tomorrow."

CHAPTER 20

As the evening progressed Steve and Kathy were taking Mark and Marci to the cleaners in a game of Spades when a man of about twenty-two approached the table asking if he could have a word with Steve.

"Sure step into my office", Steve said pointing to a table nearby.

"Thanks, I hate to be a bother".

"Just playing cards and having a little white wine, no interruption at all. How can I help you?"

"My girlfriend and another couple have been talking about taking one of the RV's and outfitting it with a trailer full of supplies. We thought it would be interesting to see as much of the country as we can, and see for ourselves just what really happened. What do you think?"

"Well," Steve started as he reached into his pocket fishing out a small cigar.

"Want one," he said gesturing with the pack. "It won't be long until they will no longer be fit to smoke."

"No thanks"

"I can tell you that this is a decision not to be taken lightly. Why don't you get your friends and join us at the table for a discussion."

"I will be right back."

Moving back to the card game Steve briefed them on what was taking place. As he completed, the young man returned with the others. "Yawl pull up a chair" Mark invited as they approached. The couples took chairs from adjacent tables forming a circle with the card players. Marci stood and said she was going to get some drinks and sandwiches for the group. Lisa the youngest by looks of the couples offered to help. The two moved along the buffet line filling trays with snacks and drinks. When they returned pushing a book cart, stacked Mark asked her if she brought enough. Marci responded with a smack to the back of head saying "none for you buster." This made the young couples laugh and point fingers at each other.

Getting down to business the four told the couples about their journey from Texas. They went into detail about the destruction and the piles of bodies witnessed along the way. As a reminder Steve interjected, "we stayed away from the big cities because of the amount of bodies and the types of weapons used to destroy. Some were nuclear and some were chemical it is possible that biological weapons were used. Stay away from them no matter what". The thing that made everyone nervous was when the story of Hooverville and the plan for the girls after the boys were killed. It was a difficult story to tell but it made a lasting point to the two girls about what type of people were roaming loose in a land without law enforcement and government. Looking at them Steve said "this is worse than the days of the Wild West." Kathy added, "Don't trust anyone you meet at first, because a small group like you can be overtaken quickly."

They also covered topics on road blockage with all of the equipment piled up on the highways," you could find yourself detouring for miles. Your motor home will need to have a winch to help clear paths when you can't go around. In addition, lack of medical aid and the ability to communicate with anyone makes for a lonesome trip." Kathy added, "We have all types of radio equipment on board the train hoping to contact someone to find out what is going on in the world and we still can't reach

anyone. If you are by yourself in a RV you are very alone in the world." Steve added that it would be helpful to have someone scout the country to see what is going on but it would be a very dangerous mission. If they were caught, they could be considered spies in certain locations, however, they could make contact with people like us and we could share information and assistance. Marci added "I would like to know how things turned out who started it, who was on who's side, who won and who is left? We just don't know anything about the world or the country." "Let me suggest this", Mark offered, "sleep on it tonight and if all of you think it is still a good plan, we will help you outfit a RV." Steve spoke up at this point, "this must remain a secret if you tell others some will want to go with you or follow. Trust me you can't move a large number of people across the country without being noticed. Others will want to go for the adventure and when the going gets rough, they will become a problem. If you do this, just leave and let people find out after you have gone." Monica spoke for the first time. "That was our plan because we talked it over before and came to the same conclusion. Some of our friends would want to go but we know they couldn't cut it", so we were just going to disappear". Jim the one that approached Steve at the start said, "I have a question that has been on the back of my mind from the start. Can we come back to the group if we leave it could be months or even a year to make this trip." Steve answered him in a direct manor. "Yes, you can but you can't bring anyone back with you, not even one person". Looks moved around the table at this answer. "I'll tell you why. It is going to be very hard for us to make it for the first few years. Crops to plant, homes to build, security, power source of some type and the list goes on and on. So we can't afford to have you show with a lot of people to take advantage of our hard work and deplete our supplies. If you return, it must be the four of you only. However, if you find others that want to settle in a nearby area and be independent we will provide all the help we can to work with them." "Fair enough." Jim stood and

shook hands with each of the four saying "we do have a lot to talk over thanks for the information it was a real eye-opener about what you have seen along the way."

The next morning Jim moved next to Steve, as they were moving through the breakfast line. "We decided it was a go, we will leave when the train does."

"All right, after breakfast Mark and I will help you collect the equipment for your trip."

"Thanks," the girls are talking with Kathy and Marci now.

"It's not going to be easy"

"We talked about it last night and decided someone needs to do it so the group will know what is going on."

With the actives of pulling out no one was paying attention to the small group. Steve went with them to *Camping World* as they showed him the RV selected for the trip."

First, of all", Steve told them," it needs to be a diesel and here is why. You can get fuel for it more easily." "How is that," Jim questioned

"With the pump, Mark is making for you; you can collect fuel from parked semi trucks, railroad locomotives, school or city buses and construction equipment. Plus they are more durable for the type of use you have in store for them."

"That's incredible", Jim replied

"Next, don't rely on modern technology for everything. Load hand tools and power tools in your trailer. If the chain breaks on the saw, you will need an ax or hand saw to complete the task. This goes for any type of work. Carry spares because repairs are left up to you so if it can't be fixed you better have a backup."

Mark walked toward the group carrying the hand pump for refueling the RV." This one" he said handing it to Jim," has a long pipe on it for reaching into fuel tanks a trucks stops and gas stations, this other has a short hose on it for taking fuel from vehicles. Keep these handy you are going to use them a lot; what else do you have in the trailer." Jim began "we have two chainsaws two axes a large saw, hand winch, set

of mechanic tools, woodworking tools. We stored them in the front of the trailer because other supplies are going to be used more often.” Mark offered, “keep an axe, shovel and small chain saw in the storage compartment of the RV you will use them more than you think.” Jim made a note of that as Dale began moving things to the RV. “Next, we have a backup generator plus tarp, lanterns, rope and things like that. The back section is for food and water.” “Good job”, Mark said, “but don’t forget the little things like toilet paper and light bulbs for the RV. You would be surprised how little thing make a difference.”

Inside the RV, Kathy was working with the girls on storage of supplies. “Keep enough stuff on hand, in case you need to dump the trailer and make a run for it. Put extra food, water and ammo in any place you can find. Small amounts of clothing and bedding but plenty of everything else should be the rule of thumb. Remember it can get a little crowded in here even with the best of friends. Steve and I have been camping from the first year we were married and have a lot of experience. Nevertheless, I can tell you sometimes you need to be alone so don’t let little things become big things. Help out the driver by working with the maps and signs, plus keep a keen eye out for trouble, it can come when you least expect it.”

Steve stuck his head inside asking if the girls could be spared for a moment. Everyone exited and gathered under a small tree.” What I want to go over with all of you is about defense. First in the driver compartment, you should have a short shotgun and several handguns. It is impossible for the driver to load a weapon and drive. So the driver will shoot and drop the weapon and pick up a fresh one, everyone understand?” The four nodded. “The front seat passenger should have an assault rifle with plenty of spare magazines, a short shotgun and several handguns. This person is going to protect the front in addition to spotting trouble for the driver. Two others will have the job of firing from the sides and the rear of the RV if you drop the trailer. One of the two will need to help load weapons dropped by the driver and front passenger.

Everyone understand up to this point?" Four heads nodded again." Remember this if you lose your head, your ass is next." The group laughed lightly at this but they knew it was true. "Now we have a favor to ask of you." "Just name it", Lisa said. "I marked a few locations of people that wanted to stay behind, the first is a man name Ray and his wife Hazel they are old and didn't want to leave their home. Tiff is their granddaughter and I would appreciate it if you find yourself in their part of the country if you would stop by and tell them how she is doing. I have a sheet of directions on how to find the house. Next is the town of Lindsey it has about one hundred and thirty people in it. Be sure and tell them right away that we sent you. You might stay a few days with them to share information. They are good people trying to make a go of it like us. Now please don't feel like you need to go to these places but if you find yourselves in the area we would appreciate knowing about them."

Jim completed welding the winch to the front bumper, standing back to admire his work he said, "It is not the most beautiful job I have ever done but it should hold any load we can put on it." Small details completed and it was time for the four to set out on their recon mission. Kathy took a photo of them in front of the RV in addition to collecting information about them for her journal. Mark handed them a call sign on a small card. "Use this on the CB radio when you returned". This would verify them to anyone in the group that would be on guard duty that they were allowed access. "Don't talk to anyone on the CB he cautioned, they can track you by your signal. It is best to keep a low profile whenever possible." Everyone shook hands and they were off.

The four now returned to the group working at the depot. As they filtered into the crowd, Troy and James approached asking if the RV got away all right. "Yes," Steve replied" we helped them with all of the equipment and advice we could. Now they are on their own". James answered back, "I hope we see them in the future because they can bring volumes of information back. We should be ready to shove off

soon.” Looking down the length of the train Steve said to Mark “well it ain’t the *Amtrack-Crescent* but it she sure looks good to me.” Mark nodded “yep, she does”. “What is the *Crescent*?” Troy questioned. Steve answered as he pulled some small cigars from his pocket. “It runs from New York to Atlanta and then New Orleans. It makes a stop here in Canton that is where this cut of cars came from.” He pointed to the smoke covered cars added to the train.” Have a smoke,” handing a one to Troy.” In a few weeks, they won’t be fit to smoke.” Wes came up looking at Steve he said, “The highrailer is ready.”

“Great I’m sorry I didn’t get to help you with it”.

“That’s OK I know you were busy getting the recon team off. Who do you want to ride with us?”

“Ryan with the M60 for sure, that boy can handle it well.”

James spoke up asking if he could travel with the group, looking at the pair. “OK by me”, Wes said,” good by me” Steve replied. Troy asked if he could ride with the train crew. Mark shook his head yes. “One other thing,” Wes added “due to the number of people we have now if we run into trouble we should have groups or squads assigned with each person a special task. If everyone grabs a rifle and runs to the fight, it will be unorganized and no one will be bringing up extra ammo and supplies. Plus, we could get a group shooting at each other during a flanking move.”

“Right you are, we are too large to handle it like we did in the past. We had better get everyone assembled now to work out the details.”

The majority of people were at the depot awaiting further instructions for departure. Wes stepped up onto a large crate asking everyone to gather around for a few announcements. When the noise died down, he went into the plans on forming squads for emergencies. The senior citizens were to take the children into the forward passenger car for shelter in addition to monitoring the bank of radios. Mark was going to move to the second engine breaking the first along with the gun car loose. This

would allow the train to retreat if necessary. The combat teams would rush forward climbing into the gun car. Any person not involved in the actual combat would work in the resupply teams.

“Any questions so far.”

Several hands went up. Wes pointed to one in the back, “yes sir. Who is going to coordinate the actions of the team?”

“Great question, the scout team is made up of four people one of the will be ready to meet the train when it approaches and advise everyone in the gun car what is happening. Each team will select a leader and this leader will be advised by the scout team as to what action to take. It is important to remain inside the car until the plan is made. Remember the bad guys will be dressed like us in most cases. So, we could end up shooting each other if we don’t have a plan.”

“Yes sir,” Wes said pointing to a man on his left.

“When are we going to fight and when are we going to run?”

“Anytime we can leave and not fight, we will. I think all of us want to make it to our destination, so if life is not at stake why fight for nothing.”

“Yes,” he said pointing to a young woman

“I am afraid if I get off the train I could be left in all of the excitement”

“I understand does anyone have a suggestion for this problem?”

A voice from the center spoke up. “Each person could have a partner to call out their name and be sure they are on board”.

“Good idea. Everyone agree?” Heads nodded in accord. “OK pick someone in your squad and exchange names.”

“Anything else?”

“I have a question”

“OK”

“It is going to be hard to climb into the gun car can we rig up some type of ladder for that?”

Wes spoke up;” we can take roof ladders from the fire trucks for that. They have hooks on the tip and can be hooked over the top of the car; also, attic ladders can be used as well.”

“What is an attic ladder”, came the question back.

“It is a type of folding ladder used by firefighters to carry inside a house and gain access to the attic. When it is folded it is the size of a long 2X4 and unfolded it is about twelve inches wide, they are perfect for quick use in tight places.”

“Anything else, OK let’s issue weapons and ammo to everyone”, Robert along with Matt and Joey opened the back of a rental truck loaded with rifles and handguns in addition to another with magazines and boxes of ammo for each. Several other boxes contained holsters and knives. As the group passed in a single line, they picked up the items and began to board the train. With the last of the work completed, it was time to be off from Canton.

Troy and James had decided to ride in the passenger cars for a few miles to help get things organized with the squads and ammo. The younger children moved into a car and watched over by Sister Carol and two of the senior citizen ladies. Mike had taken the senior men forward to the radio section explaining to them all of the different types as well as warning them not to answer anyone who called out but to only monitor the traffic. He also told them that the scout unit was called number one or *Lead Dogs*, the engines were number two and that the body of the train was number three.” Listen closely for any trouble calls from the lead units and pass along to the rest of the passengers, any plans for stops or things that might cause problems.” He also advised them that it could get boring at times because hours went by without hearing a sound. He also went on to explain that we do not like to answer radio calls

because we have been caught in several ambushes and do not know whom to trust, so we stay off the air to avoid giving our position away. "After all", he said, "we are tied to the track we can't drive off in any direction we want. If they know where we are, they will move ahead and set a trap for us." The men understood and among themselves worked out a schedule to monitor the equipment for short periods giving each other breaks

Mike entered a car and found a group sitting and talking as they loaded magazines and placed them in the marked ammo cans. The people were talking about how they were glad to be moving away from *The Point* and how the rescue operation was a miracle. Other conversation was about the plans for a new life. One woman said, "I felt like I survived for a purpose, I am not sure what it is but I can tell you, from now on, I am going to do my best to live a good life." As she spoke, she placed a full can of .223 mags on the floor. Another woman said "I agree with you one hundred percent." Mike spoke with them for a moment but continued through the car until he found his mother in the kitchen car. She was drinking a *Diet Coke* and talking with a group of women about the meal plans. Mike did not recognize several of the women so he assumed they were from the Cedar Point group. Kathy looked at him and said, "Does everyone know my son Mike?" The new faces answered yes and smiled at him. He said, "At the next stop I am going to ride in the second engine for a while." With that, he collected a few drinks and moved to the rear in search of Maria.

CHAPTER 21

In the highrailer things moved at a steady pace the map was showing double track for a long stretch and the countryside gave easy viewing. Wes kept a constant speed of thirty miles an hour. With James, decision to ride in the train until the first stop Matt had moved into the seat next to Ryan. The talk in the truck was moving from

topic to topic, as the miles moved by. Matt finally offered up the question that had been on his mind from the time the train had pulled into Canton. In a calm but concerned voice, he said, "While there is just the four of us in here I have a question that most of my classmates have been thinking about." "Go-ahead" Steve said looking at him over his shoulder.

"Well now that the group has increased in size everyone is not going to start treating us like high school kids are they, we have all shown that we can pull our weight right?"

"What left-field did an idea like that come from?" Steve answered in a surprised voice

"Well it was a thought. We have noticed some of the people from the group we rescued about the same age as us and they seem on the immature side."

"Well then, you lead by example if they see the work and responsibly taken on by you they will follow or at least know what is expected of them. Trust me Matt if get into another fight I want you right there with me, I know you and the rest of your friends can cut it. I am not sure about anyone else yet."

Wes shook his head in agreement "I second that, time after time your classmates have stepped up when it mattered most. Look at all of the missions that were accomplished because of you."

Steve paused for a moment and said, "Think of it this way your generation will be the ones to rebuild the country or even the world. By the time we get things in order and somewhat established most of us be old or dead. You are the doctors, farmers, engineers or whatever of tomorrow. You have a lot to learn and will need to wear many different hats to make it work. Tell your friends that we are all proud of them and depend on them more than they think."

Wes added, "Stand on your own two feet and take charge you will have our backing." Matt gave a big grin and said, "Will do."

On board the train the new travelers were getting accustomed to life in close quarters. Boxes piled high with ammo and medical supplies ready for action, which no one wanted to come. Several of the women had asked to take over the cooking for a while telling the original kitchen crew that they would give them a break. None of the women objected to that. Marci told them it is going to be great now that you do not have to use gas grills and generators to work. Sara and Christa found themselves talking with Kathy about what to expect when they arrived at the *Biltmore House*. She explained to them that it was going to take all hands to do all of the jobs required for success but even she did not know what to expect. The girls probed a little farther. "How old were you when you and Steve got married", Sara asked with a crooked smile.

"Well, I was twenty-six", she said, "I had been out of college for a while."

"I guess we won't be going. My family wanted me to go to Penn State."

"I would say you will be going to a different type of school. This one will be everything from medical to mechanical."

"How so"

"Well think of all of the things that we must do to live. You need to know all that you can. Look at it this way the pioneers that settled this country had to be able to handle any problem that came their way. You will too."

"I never really thought of that"

"So, you may find yourself married sooner than you think."

The two girls looked at each other smiling but trying not to let it show and Kathy tried to pretend not to see them. The conversation moved into other directions but the underlying tone was that of how uncertain the girls felt about their future and the world as a whole. Kathy answered the questions asked with positive reinforcement but at the same time, she wondered what was in store for the group as they made their way into the unknown.

In another car, the stress of the journey was beginning to show on Karen. She had never been one of the adventurous ones of the camping group but always was willing to try whatever the others wanted to do. In the last few days of the trip, she was always quiet and somewhat removed from everyone when the train was in motion. Nevertheless, she was one of the first to jump into any task when stopped for resupply or servicing the train. She spent much of her time looking out the window at nothing particular and occasionally reading a paperback book that she carried throughout the train. Blanca had noticed she was drinking more than usual. When she mentioned it to Marci and Kathy, they also commented on the change in her. "Maybe she is trying to come to terms with things or maybe she needs to be involved more in the day-to-day actives", Blanca suggested. "Whatever it is we should all agree to keep an eye on her for awhile," added Marci.

The radio came to life as the *Lead Dogs* announced a stop to check out a bridge. As Jeff eased the train to a stop, about fifty yards from the highrailer James and Troy took this opportunity to move from the cars to the positions they had requested to ride earlier. During the change, Wes walked to the rear with Matt pretending to get food from the train. However, in reality, he used this time to tell Matt to reassure his classmate of the conversation that had taken place and how important they were to the success of the operation. Matt thanked him saying he was going to get a bite to eat and move to the gun car at the next stop. Wes slapped him on the back and said in a voice that could be heard by anyone in the adjacent car "thanks for a good job". He then gathered up a few supplies and started moving forward with James beside him.

"So how is it looking today?"

"Really good so far, clear tracks and nothing looks damaged until now."

"Is Steve checking the bridge or is he waiting for us?"

"No, he is checking it and Ryan is providing cover."

“I want to be of help but I don’t want to get in the way.”

“Don’t worry you will be a pro in no time.”

The bridge spanned one hundred and fifty feet and was the typical trestle construction. Heavy timber with the support rails in the center, the reason for the stop was on the far side, the landscape was drastically different. The view only permitted a line of sight for about one-half of a mile showing everything charred and burned this was the most severely damaged area that the train would pass through in the state of Mississippi to date. Moving across the bridge Steve motioned for Ryan to wait. “I don’t want him to get trapped in the open with that heavy machinegun,” Steve said under his breath as he stepped carefully from the last section on to the bank. By this time, Wes along with James stood at the ready with Ryan. “It sure looks bad”, James remarked looking with field glasses toward stumps that were no taller than a head high. Wes answered back, “the last time we encountered a spot like this we found missile remains nearby.”

“Where was that?”

“A section in Louisiana, not near any type of town or anything just in the middle of nowhere.”

“What type of missile was it?”

“Couldn’t tell but we made a drawing of the markings on the remains. One thing for sure it wasn’t American.”

Steve was back in view now and he waived the truck across. As they moved forward the sound of the locomotive consist powering up could be heard as they prepared to follow. As he climbed into the cab, Steve told Wes to take it easy for the next few hundred yards. The area suffered heavy fire damage as far as I can see he reported to the crew. Wes slowed to a speed of ten miles per hour moving passed the burned remains of several signal boxes and stacks of ties on the shoulder. The fire by all inspection and appearance was feed by something other than the grass and

woodlands. As the highrailer rounded a curve, the remains of a large plane came into view. Most of the plane had been consumed with the exception of the tail section where the *Delta Airlines* logo was still visible through heavy traces of soot." Well now, we know what caused this" Ryan said looking from the window.

As the train passed the section of plane, it became the breaking point for Karen. She screamed, "I can't take it anymore!" and began to weep and stomp her feet. Several of the women rushed to her in effort to comfort her. Blanca embraced her saying "I know, I know" Sara moved from car to car in search of Alan. Karen was crying loudly "I miss Texas, I miss my house, and I want to go home!" Alan entered the car, and upon seeing him she broke from Blanca running to him shouting "Take me home, take me home now!" he held her and sat in a seat with her in his lap, not saying a word letting her vent her anger for awhile. The other people moved from the car to give them privacy. In a few moments, her rage turned to tears. She wept bitterly for the next half-hour. When it was over, she stood up red-eyed saying to him, "I guess I need to apologize to everyone for making such a fool of myself." "I think it's alright you didn't say anything that everyone else wasn't thinking". He kissed her gently offering to get her some coffee or anything she wanted. They sat alone for a few moments before Amber entered the car asking, "Mom are you alright" "I'm better now sweetie" came the answer.

CHAPTER 22

In the truck, the four were making plans for the evening stop. "It is only about three hours before dark but I would like to put more distance between the burned area and

us.”

“I agree.”

“What does the map show?”

“No towns close to the tracks”

“Well I guess we can always find an open field, we have done it many times before.”

“This looks good up here, let’s stop and have a look around.”

Wes radioed the train telling them to come up short on mile marker 347.3. The area was large pasture on the left and soybean fields to the right, “Marshall will like this for the livestock”, Wes said as he shouldered his rifle.

“Yes, plus there is a stream for all of our water needs.”

“Let’s check and see if the water is clean enough for us to use.”

Ryan positioned the M60 on the rear deck and opened a can of *Coke*. He kept a weather eye for movement in the far tree line. The plan implemented many times was for him to provide covering fire in the event the scout team had to retreat. This thought made him nervous due to the fact his friends would be running toward him as he fired passed them. James motioned for them; he found fresh hoof prints along the bank. The men returned to meet the train as it slowed to stop fifty feet from the highrailer. With people dismounting from various cars, Steve could see Kathy heading to him in a quick step. When they met, she hugged him, moving to a private spot. At this point, she told him of Karen’s breakdown.

“This could become contagious she warned, people who have remained strong could now fall apart at the sight of her.”

“What should we do”, he questioned.

“I’m not sure.”

The evening camp resembled an advertisement for *KOA*, tents popped up followed by yard chairs and picnic tables. In the distance campfires with the heavy cooking grates filled with pots giving off the smell of another meal in the making.

James located Marshall who along with several others had unloaded the stock pushing them toward the stream. When he arrived, Steve had the area map unfolded looking intensely. Marshall joked as he walked up “you look like General Patton studying battle plans.” Tossing a cigar at him, he replied “some days I feel like him. Did James tell you about the hoof prints?”

“Yes, he did.”

“What do you think?”

“Well to tell the truth, I would like to saddle up a few people up and look for them. The more we can find the better off we will be.”

“How long and who do you need?”

“Four should be enough and if we don’t locate them by midmorning then I will call it off.”

“When do you want to go?”

“Well it will be dark soon, so I would say at first light. It will give me this evening to get our gear together.”

“Good plan, but don’t get in a jam over some cattle.”

“I won’t if it looks bad we will break off.”

“Thanks Marshall.”

Kathy had been standing nearby overhearing the conversation. When Marshall left to prepare, she stepped close to him asking if he was going on the trip. “No baby I think I will leave this to the real cowboys, besides we have too many other things on-going”.

“Good”, she said, “you always seem to be in the workforce no matter how much I try to get you to settle down. Let’s eat.” As the pair walked toward the field kitchen, he noticed groups of kids playing with a soccer ball as others were still setting up their camp for the night. “This must be the way circus people lived in the old days,” he remarked.

“Well then, that would make you the ringmaster.”

“Why is that?”

“Don’t you ever notice how people come to you with their problems?”

“Well this was my idea so I guess I must bear the responsibility.”

“I just don’t want to see you end up like Karen”

“How is she anyway?”

“Better, now I guess she just needed to vent.”

“Notice how the students are working” he said pointing to several of them carrying firewood to the center of the site as others poured water into the large tubs for cleaning the cooking equipment.

“They had Matt speak to Wes and me about not wanting to be treated like kids.”

“Where did they get that impression? “

He explained it to her as they moved closer to the line.

The next morning Marshall led the team out as soon as the sun began to show. Dana had fixed breakfast for them in addition to some trail food. They tried to leave quietly to let people sleep in. Several of the cooking crew was up stoking the fires. With the amount of food, necessary to feed the group the task of food preparation had been broken up into sections, some made ready the food ,others placed the paper and plastic ware out, while others heated water for cleaning pots and pans. Each section rotated task at the next meal so no one was stuck doing the same chore. This morning Dana carried coffee out to the people that were on the last portion of sentry duty Susan had taken the post about twenty yards from the rear car. As Dana approached, she could see Susan in a crouched position rifle at the ready and whistle poised in her lips. She stared intently at a section of trees as though she expected something to appear any moment. Dana carried two thermos bottles in each hand so she was only wearing the 9mm on her hip. In the back of her mind she felt, by the time I use this ammo up help will be here so I am all right. Still watching Susan,

she ducked into the ditch running along the track making her way beside her. "Watch you got", she said softly.

"I don't know for sure. I have been listing to a sound like breaking branches before first light but I couldn't see anything in the dark." As the two strained for a better view, a four-point buck broke the cover. Susan fired at once, the deer dropped and tried to rise, and she sent a second shot into the front shoulder collapsing it. Susan rushed forward with AR-15 still at the ready as Dana ran to the camp telling everyone not to panic. Two men ran to assist Susan. As they arrived she had it rolled on to its back ready to field dress it. The trio carried it into camp as she stepped lively saying "I got a little something for the cook pot." The sound of the shots sent everyone scrambling for weapons and cover but the sight of fresh meat brought a cheer. Steve and Wes looked at each other saying, "She got a deer and we saw hoof prints, this area is supporting life well." As they spoke, the boom of the highrailer hoisted up the deer. Susan's husband John was skinning it when he paused and said, "Look at that two shots within four inches of each other great shooting Sue." "If I had my 30-30," she said casually "I could have got him with one shot."

As camp began to break a voice shouted "hello in the camp", it was Marshall. "Hello, yourself" the guard called back "we got some stock on the way."

He entered the camp telling all they found six head and would be arriving in about ten minutes. Several of the people began to make ready for them. As he rode by, he motioned for Steve and Wes to follow him. Wes went to find James and Troy. Marshall dismounted with a serious look on his face. Steve poured a cup of coffee handing it to him as they waited for the others to arrive.

"Something bad"?

"Yep!" The four gathered around as Marshall pulled the map and compass from his pocket. "About here, we found two vans and a pickup with eight bodies in the roadway. The vehicles and all occupants were shot to bits."

"How far is that from here?"

"Maybe five or six miles".

"How long do you think has been?"

"Looks like a day or two at the most".

"Did it look like they took cover or were they killed in the vehicles?"

"All but two were still inside when killed. The two others, killed execution style shot in the back of the head."

"Were they armed?"

"Yep, but I don't think they had time to fire a shot. The vans riddled on both sides front to back. Brass was everywhere and lots of it, including shotgun shells."

"Any guess on how many?"

"Judging by the brass and location of it, I would say ten or more. Another thing it was men and women so it wasn't like Hooverville, plus they didn't take anything. Of course, it was so shot up nothing was left to take."

"Did the others see it?"

"Yep, we looked it over closely for tracks. By my guess, they left on the road; nothing was showing in the grass around it in the way of tracks."

"Why, there is not a town on the map for another ten miles or so."

"No but there is a large farmhouse about a mile and a half from where it took place."

"Did you see anyone there?"

"To tell you the truth we didn't get to close. The amount of firepower used was too much for us."

"Smart move, no need in getting into a gun battle if not necessary. Let's get the group together and tell them what you found, break camp and haul-ass ASAP." The gathering upon hearing the news resembled a scene from *M*A*S*H* where the hospital bugged out. People scurried about breaking camp in record time. As the last

items found there place on board, the crew moved toward the highrailer. Steve found Kathy as he walked the train checking things. Her look spoke volumes and he knew it well. "I promise to be careful." Looking at him sternly her reply came "you always have to be in the thick of things don't you."

"Not by choice baby, not by choice. I will switch places as soon as I can."

"Listen to me" she said in a now caring voice, "you better be careful, if you get your ass killed I will never speak to you again."

They both broke into laughter. "That is not exactly how it was supposed to come out".

"Well I know what you meant."

He kissed her and moved toward the truck. The plan to move the train as quickly possible this meant the truck would only keep a two hundred yard distance. It made the crews uneasy due to the fact any trouble put both parties at risk in addition it made retreating down the line more congested. Wes held the highrailer at forty miles per hour. Ryan positioned the M60 on the window ledge telling Wes, "If I squeeze off a burst, you will be covered in hot brass." "Let's hope it don't come to that" he replied. James covered the window on the opposite side with stacks of extra mags nearby. The crew moved on, always on the alert. Finally, James broke the silence asking, "how far have we traveled now?" Wes looking at the dash answered "about eight miles" Ryan spoke now "I don't understand, why kill those people for nothing?"

"I don't understand it either and I guess we will never know."

"Where do you think the people came from?"

"Hard to say, both groups could have been traveling in opposite directions and just happened to meet there."

"It still doesn't make sense to me"

"Me either."

The truck moved around a bend exposing another large open area for what looked to be several miles. Everyone pulled binoculars from under the seat and scanned the

area for any signs of trouble.

To the rear of the truck, the same action was taking place. A second squad moved into the gun car at pull out from camp. The engines now carried extra people all with nerves on edge after hearing the story from the cattle round up. The memory of the Cedar Point escape remained fresh. In the far distance, faint smoke was rising in two distinct columns. The truck crew became fixated on it and Wes slowed to ten miles per hour.

“How far away do you think it is?”

“Can’t tell maybe a couple of miles. Hope it is not near the track and we can bypass it.”

“Do you think we should send out an advance party to check it out?”

“Yep! We should have a good look at it before we wander into something bad.”

Easing to a stop the train crew met with the *Lead Dogs* to form a plan.” Whoever goes to check it out will need to be very stealthy and not bring trouble down on us “Mark said eyeing the smoke. “The four-wheelers will be too loud you can hear them a mile away.”

“It is a long walk there and back we could lose valuable time.”

“What do you think?”

Wes spoke as he also stared at the smoke, which by now seemed to darken against the sky. “We could send two riders on horseback that would be fast and quiet.”

“Yes” agreed Steve, “two riders could cover the ground and report back without



tipping our location.”

“Who can we get to do it?”

“Let’s ask for volunteers”

When the request was made Marshall and his son, Luke offered at once to go. As Marshall put it, “we have been working stock from horseback all of our lives. If need-be we can ride like the wind.” The two were mounted and gone in a matter of moments. As they moved into the distance, other plans unfolded. The map spread upon the ground showed a three mile backtrack to the next line. Wes and Troy moved about checking that all systems were go in the event a hasty retreat was called for. James had taken a position on top of the lead locomotive with field glasses keeping a constant vigil for trouble. Others moved about ensuring ammo and first aid supplies were at the ready.

“The only thing now is to watch and wait” Steve said to Kathy as she stood next to him with her hand on the 9mm holstered but at the ready. They did not wait long; James called down from the roof. “I see one rider approaching fast, standby.” Another moment passed and he announced it was Luke and he is ridding Hell-bent –

for –leather. The group now collected weapons standing at the ready as the rider entered the circle. Luke began speaking as he dismounted the heavy breathing horse. “We spotted a Jeep and a RV both are burning all over. Dad and I watched for a few moments and couldn’t see anyone near them so he sent me back to tell you, while he moved in to check them out.”

Steve began to ask more questions.

“How far away were you?”

“About three hundred yards”

“And you couldn’t see anyone”

“Nope! And we checked with our binoculars for tracks too”

“What did your father say?”

“He said to get back here as fast as I could and warn everyone.”

“How far is it from here to the fire?”

“About three miles.”

“And you didn’t see any sign of others?”

“No, not a thing.”

“Come over here and look at this map.”

Angela and Amber took the horse and began to rub it and walk it to cool off before watering it down. The others crowded around the map with Luke pointing out the location. “Right here on the highway”, he spoke placing his finger near and intersection of a main road and a small secondary country road. “That explain the two columns of smoke,” Mark added. “Yep,” added Wes “that means it was recent. The tires on the Jeep would have burned out by now. The RV could burn for a day before it would be consumed.” “We had better make a plan quickly” Steve said as he climbed the steps of the front engine. Everyone listen up he began.” We found victims shot up back down the line and it looks like we have found more. By our best judgment, these people were killed for no apparent reason other than the fact they ran into the wrong

people. Do you want to proceed on this route or backtrack about three miles and take another line"? From the back of the crowd a voice called out "let's keep moving surly they would attack a group the size of this." Another voice was heard, "if they block the track we are trapped and become sitting ducks." Others voiced agreement with the second person." We had better be safe than sorry" Steve said, "So lets prepare to back the train up. We need some volunteers to ride on the rear and watch for trouble". Several hands went up Mark handed a radio to one of them and they began gathering equipment.

James shouted from his look out post "here comes Marshall". All activity came to a halt as he rode into the group. Sara and Tiff took his horse beginning to give it the same care as the girls were with Luke's. Marshall stepped down and Dana moved to his side. He had a grim look about him seen by all. As he started to speak, the words choked in his throat. "It is another massacre just like the other one. Hundreds of shells on the roadway and surrounding area. Nobody even got out of the vehicles don't know how many there were but the smell is awful. Another thing it happened not that long ago because who ever set them on fire poured gasoline on the roadway making a trail to light it by. The tires and bodies are just now starting to burn in the Jeep". Dana handed him a bottle of water and hugged him strongly.

"That settles it let's get moving as soon as the horses are loaded and the rear crew is in place". Steve said in a voice of anger. The crowd was starting to move to its ridding positions as Wes prepared to turn the highrailer around. In the distance, a sound resembling gunfire erupted. Steve still standing on the steps of the train shouted for the group to be quite. It was the sound of gunfire there was no mistaking that from anything else." What about it", he said from the steps. James climbed down from the roof and said, "we should take a group and check it out. It might save some more innocent people from being killed and now that we know where they are, we can

put a stop to it before they come after us next.” “Who wants to fight and who wants to go back”, Steve asked the group. “Send a group on the truck and start backing up the train at the same time,” Troy suggested. “That way if need be we can still get out and if we can do away with them we are clear to move on”. Steve turned to Mark and Jeff saying “put the volunteers on the rear and back to the switch holding there until we see how this turns out.” As he spoke to them, others were piling on the highrailer. Stacking ammo and weapons along the floor for what was expected to be a serious firefight. Turning to Kathy, he asked, “Stay or go”? “You better go; they will need you for sure this time.” She hugged him and climbed on the front engine to ride to the rear. As he moved to mount the truck, he paused at the rear. “This is very important; the element of surprise is on our side. DO NOT, DO NOT fire until you hear the whistle blow is everybody clear on this.” “Yes!” Came the group reply. “Watch your squad leaders and be sure of your shots.” The truck pulled away at the fastest speed Wes felt the highrailer could handle the track.

The sound grew intense as they rounded a curve and it became clear that the fight was nearby. Wes stopped and the group dismounted. He took Ryan and Matt to move ahead taking the point. Ryan was packing the M60 with belts of ammo over his shoulder. Steve and James were forming the people into squads. There would be four squads of four people each. “I will take two squads and James will take the other two.” Marshall had the sniper rifle over his shoulder and had given the .50cal. to Jason telling him “take this and stay with Steve “Jason was carrying the 50 on his shoulder and ammo can full of different types of rounds. Marshall again reminded Jason “don’t be more than ten feet from him at anytime. “

As the unit was forming up Matt came into the group on a run. “What do we have “Steve questioned. He spoke hurriedly as though the words were flowing and he could not control them. “A two story brick house surrounded by about ten or twelve shooting the place apart. A few people inside trying to return fire but they can’t cover

all of the windows at once.” Steve turned to James, “take your two squads and take the center and the left and I will take the others and take the center and the right. Don’t move to the rear until we have them on the run. Everybody wait for the signal and we can really take them before they know what hit them”.

The squads moved out in a sprint with Matt leading the way. At the crest of a knoll, he motioned them down and began to low crawl forward. Ryan and Wes were now in view, James and Steve motioned for the group to stay as they moved forward to receive info from Wes. "Only two in the rear just there to keep anyone from escaping out the back, fourteen from what I can tell around the house." Using the cover of the hill James began to deploy squads giving last minute direction to the leaders. Steve was doing the same as Matt and Jason set up the .50cal Jason piled ammo on the ground as Matt began to search with the field glasses. Marshall passed the sniper rifle off to Wes telling him "I'll spot you're the better shot." Ryan had caught one of the passing squad members to feed ammo for him.

With the deployment in place, people were nervously watching the action below them, whispering to each other "let's get on with it" Squad leaders told the people which section to fire on when the command came. "If we all fire at the same spot we will miss getting a lot of them on the first volley" Robert told his people. After a few moments sizing up the enemy Steve blew the whistle and all Hell broke loose on the aggressors. Several fell instantly riddled with holes from head to foot. Ryan let loose with the M60 at two bad guys hiding behind a *Toyota* turning it and them into a mess in a single long burst. Matt was spotting targets for Steve. With the opening shots, the attackers panicked not knowing the direction of the fire. Now several of them were returning fire to the knoll. This caused concern because the small hill provided limited cover. The people inside the house had a better opportunity to see the attackers and they began to fire in a more aggressive manor.

As Steve drew a bead on bad guy hiding behind a wood pile, he heard Matt say “no you don’t you son-of-a –bitch”. He pulled back from the scope in time to witness Matt and Jason running along the hill to the point where it dipped into the pasture. Looking ahead, he could see what they were chasing. One of the two stationed at the back of the house dashed toward the woods in an attempt to escape. The two young men were in hot pursuit, Matt with the pistol grip shotgun over his shoulder and Jason having drawn his 9mm was covering ground like sprinters. Thinking aloud Steve said, “When they catch whoever that is I hope they leave enough to question.” The other rear guard trying to flee was cut down by James’s left flank in short order.

A shout brought Steve attention back to the battle and away from the two runners. The sound came from the squad in the center. “Larry’s hit”, came the cry repeatedly; Wes turned the rifle over to Marshall grabbing his medical bag in one scoop dashing to the aide of the wounded man. As he began his examination of Larry, another call for help came from down the line. Wes shouted, “Hold on I will be there as soon as I can.” Larry’s wound was to his left shoulder. However, the bullet had struck the ground ricocheting upward striking his collarbone. The skin was peeled back fracturing the bone but did not penetrate the body. It was very painful and left no doubt in Wes’s mind that it was a green stick fracture. He wrapped the wound and placed the arm in a sling telling him to take this pill for pain and start back toward the train and find Shirley the nurse. As Larry moved down the hill, Wes slid down the line to his next patient. It was Chris and he had packed and wrapped his leg with the help of Lucas. Wes looked at the wound. “Lucky for you it hit the outside of you thigh and missed the bone and the femoral artery. It did blow away a chunk of meat about the size of a silver dollar but it will be all right”. He redressed it and sent him down the hill with Lucas helping him.

The battle although less than fifteen minutes old was nearly over. The only two bad guys left were trying to make a run for it but all of the fire consternated on them.

With the barrage of bullets, reaching such intensity the woodpile and well house that provided cover began to crumble. In a last ditch effort the pair dashed toward a small shed near the edge of a field of tall grass.” If they can make it to the grass, we would have to burn them out”, Steve thought. However, the left flank put up a volley that sent them into eternity.

Now silence filled the air. It was the type of silence after a tornado had passed, when everything was too quiet to be real. Steve stood calling in to the house. “Is everyone OK do you need medical help”.

“Who are you “

“We are friendly, do you need any medical aide.”

“Yes, we have two wounded. We could use a doctor.”

Wes shouted back, “I am on my way and I am going to bring someone to help me.”

“Hurry, please.”

Wes ran down the hill with a volunteer in tow. As he entered, the house Steve, James and Marshall along with several others had begun to walk to the killing field. “I want to know what kind of people act like this”, Steve said to Marshall as he handed him a small cigar. “So would I”, he answered. When they approached the first body, they stopped and looked at each other in disbelief. “This guy couldn’t be more than sixteen”. James called them over as he stood beside another. “What would you say, sixteen”. Several of the ones that had walked down the hill now turned quickly and climbed to the top. More than a few were sick to their stomachs at what they had witnessed. The two near the car that Ryan had got on the first volley were not recognizable but it was easy to tell they were young. As they stood, surveying the carnage Matt and Jason appeared on the rise to the left, with someone between them. It was the boy that had broke and ran when the firing became intense. Matt had taken his belt and tied the boys hands behind his back and Jason had taken his belt and fashioned a leash around the boys neck. He was being lead like a horse to the group.

“This should give us the answers we need”, James said pointing at the trio.

“Yep! I really want to hear this”, Marshall responded.

The boy resembled a wild wolf- boy from a circus sideshow. His eyes were glassy showing no emotion. He made guttural grunts and looked from side to side as he studied each person. “Tell Wes we need to see him as soon as he can break free”, Steve said to a man standing near them. The man gladly moved away from them and headed to the house. Pulling a section of parachute cord from his pack Steve tied the young man to a nearby tree as though he was attaching a horse to a hitching post. The young man still did not speak; he only made grunting noises and stared at them. Several of the assault team stood nearby talking among themselves and pointing at the boy. James moved toward them and asked scouts to patrol a short radius of the area and check things out. Groups of three began to scatter.

Wes came from the house followed by three others. When they met in the yard Steve pointed to the tree informing them of what had taken place,” this boy looks like he is on something to me, see what you think.” “Everybody stay here I will have a look.” He moved in the direction of the tree. The man that had walked beside Wes from the house now stepped forward,” my name is Craig”, he said “and I can’t thank you enough, we would have been done for without your help.” “Glad we were in the area”, Steve replied.

“Do you know what this is all about?”

“Not a clue but we did find some vehicles down the road a few miles shot to pieces and burned.”

“How far?”

“Several miles, a jeep and a small RV”

“Oh! Shit, Oh! Shit.” Craig replied kicking his toe into the ground.

“Know them?”

“They were part of our group. They were going to try and find supplies and look for other survivors.”

“It looks like they were ambushed at a crossroads and never knew what hit them. Most never got out of their seats.”

“You think it was the same people, pointing to the bodies in the yard”

“Yes, I do we haven’t seen anyone else and it was the same style of attack as best as we can tell.”

Wes now stepped into the circle, “he is high on something that is for sure and it should wear off in a little while, but you might get some answers from him now.” As the men moved toward the tree, one of the scouts topped the hill in full sprint. It was Carl a tall skinny man leading a group down the road. “You guys might want to see this,” he said gasping for breath.

“Where?”

“Half-mile back”

“What have you got?”

“Trucks, vans, jeep all loaded with stuff, strange stuff”.

James turned to Steve and said, “we better check this out, but not everyone.” Marshall said, “he would return to the train with the wounded from the house.” Wes turned to him saying, “Neither of them will make it.”, Craig looked to him asking; “Justin is still alive, right?”

“Only for a short time, he is bleeding internally and I can’t stop it. I gave him some pain medicine to make him comfortable but that is all I can do.” Craig spun around looking Steve straight in the eye asking, “What are you going to do with him” pointing to the teen tied to the tree.

“Well we are going to question him and then it was your people they attacked so the rest is up to you.”

James suggested guards be placed on the teen until they returned from checking out the discovery made by the scouts. Marshall took a small group and headed for the train. Telling the others, he would advise them what had happened. As they moved away, several offered to watch the prisoner and several began to assist the people in the house.

Carl led the way to the site. The truck a four-door model with the back seat filled with CD's, empty beer and wine bottles plus dozens of boxes of ammo. In the bed was food, more ammo assorted guns, boxes of junk food and beer but the thing standing out the most was large boxes of CD's and DVD's. "That's strange", Carl said looking at the group, "but you ain't seen nothing yet." The van was full of junk food and guns plus bags of pot scattered throughout. Carl pointed to plastic containers stacked in the rear. "We didn't know what that stuff is so we came for you guys". The crew that was guarding the scene moved in to hear what the discovery was. No one knew but Steve suggested that they send for Wes. "This is pot, but the rest beats me." Tom who had been one of the guards started to run back for Wes as the remainder of the men turned their attention to the jeep. It looks like the truck James said after perusing it for a few moments. Nothing here to sustain life just booze, guns and junk food. "How could they make it for the long term?" "I think they were living house to house", Steve offered.

Wes returned with the scout and began to peer inside at the items in question. After a moment, he turned to the others offering his explanation. "This is cocaine", he said pointing to several containers," but this is far worse" as he gestured at others." It contains mushrooms, the wild kind you find in pastures that cause hallucinations, I mean crazy shit, and this is Meth. I witnessed this when I was a firefighter-paramedic." "That explains why the teen tied to the tree is so out of it. What should we do", Asked Carl. "Let me take some of the cocaine for medical use when we run out of other pain meds, but keep it quiet I don't want everybody talking about

us having drugs. They will get the wrong idea, alright!" "Gotcha!" Came the answer from Carl the remainder nodded their heads in understanding. "Burn the rest is my advice". As he spoke, Carl and Tom were pulling lighters from their pockets. Each of the vehicles was so filthy everyone chose to walk back rather than ride in the jeep.

As they returned to the house, it was apparent to the team that the survivors had taken Steve up on his offer to travel with the train. They told everyone of what they had found up the road and Craig stated he had informed his group of what had happened to the ones that had left in search of food and other people. The attention now focused on the teen at the tree. Steve approached the teen, with a fit of rage that frighten the entire group including some of the people that had known him from childhood." It's time to talk or I am going to make you wish you had". He spit the words at the teen. The young man turned his eyes to him and said, "You cocksuckers ruined it for us!" He began to rant," We were going for the record, at least a thousand kills," he said. "No one would ever be able to beat that! We would be the talk of the school forever! No students would even get close to that not in a million years! You lousy cocksuckers, now it is all for nothing, we will just be nobody's like before!" Everyone just looked at him in astonishment, did he not know what had happened to the world let alone his friends, that there was no more school.

Steve walked away turning to Craig and saying, "well there is your answer. Your group was attacked and your friends killed. The punishment is up to you and your people." Craig moved his people to one side for about one minute, and then stepped to the teen with a large revolver in his hand. "The jury has spoken," he said as the shot removed the right side of the still ranting teens head.

Turning back to the train members, he said, "If the offer still stands we are ready to go." "The offer is still standing don't worry about supplies we can take care of that, but if you have a personal items by all means bring them". The six survivors

entered the house and returned in ten minutes carrying several items in boxes. They began the walk to the train.

The remainder of the force along with the new additions to the assemblage started down the grade toward the train. From a nearby cluster of brush Steve heard the word "Flash" shouted, quickly he replied "Thunder". As he stepped from the center of the group, Jose stepped from the brush, "didn't recognize anyone, so I went in to the security mode".

"Good job always pays to be careful. Are you out here alone?"

"No Raquel is over there", pointing to a downed log.

"How long have you been on guard?"

"As soon as the first members of the attack team returned and told what they had seen. We went into the double circle defense and have a relief squad set up for three-hour breaks."

"Great! You are on the ball, do you need anything?"

"No, we brought enough supplies to hold the position for a while."

"OK, we are going in for food, rest and to get the new members acclimated."

"How many are joining us?"

"Six, this time and we are glad to have them."

"We met up with the group last week." Jose said pointing toward his wife. "It was a miracle, we were about to give up hope of finding anyone."

Craig stepped forward reaching out his hand, "my name is Craig and I am glad you didn't meet the people we did".

Jose shook with him and said, "me too."

As they moved on toward the train, Craig spoke, "tell me about the double circle." Steve explained as they continued to walk. "Well the first circle has three people at each of the four compass points and the second circle is at the point between. For example, Jose is at the north point, at northeast and northwest a

hundred yards behind him are two other teams covering his flanks. If trouble breaks out and his set must drop back they know by running straight to the rear they will not encounter any friendly fire, plus the aggressors will be following and they will receive fire from two directions at once catching them by surprise. This action will also give us time to re-enforce the hot spot."

"Has it worked every time?"

"Well thank the Lord we haven't had trouble find us, we seem to find it first."

They now were on a small rise in sight of the train. "Pause here a moment" Steve asked, "I want to show you something. Standing at this point you can see everything", he went on. Below was the train with a flurry of activity, two *John Deer Gators* were coming from a nearby creek loaded with barrels of water. Pointing to them Steve spoke," they are hauling in water for dishes and bathing, we use bottled water for cooking and drinking. Over here," he pointed were two other *Gators* loaded with firewood pulling more behind. Another team was setting folding table in rows as others cooked. In the distance, several seniors watched the younger children on kick a soccer ball as tents were pitched. To the right Marshall's three children mounted on horseback herding the stock as they grazed. "All types of task are taking place down there" he said after a short pause "and you know what makes it special". "I give up" Craig answered. "No one is giving orders; everyone just jumps in as does what they can do to make things work." Pausing again, Steve summed up the feeling. "We burn money to cook our meals, if you want a *Rolux* pick one up at the next town we stop in, the same for diamonds or anything. The playing field in leveled."

As they descended Kathy, Blanca and Philane strolled up the rise to meet them. "We could count on the three of you to be the last", Blanca said as she hugged Wes. Philane took James rifle and slung it over her shoulder; put her arm around him as they walked. Kathy handed Steve a bottle of beer and took his other hand. He took a big swallow and then said to her," we have six new people traveling with us now."

She turned to Linda standing nearby saying “welcome aboard, I would like to talk with all of you after supper and we better hurry because it is about ready.”

Jeff was standing on a chair about to give the blessing when they entered the area. Steve looked toward his brother asking if he could say few words first. "Sure jump up here and go ahead." Steve climbed onto the chair "I promise to be brief"

"I hope so" came a voice from the back; the food smells too good to wait long." The crowd burst into laughter. "All I want to say is after the evening meal I think we should have a short meeting, now let's eat." Turning now to the new members of the group Steve said, "Make yourself at home and get something to eat we will get you settled in later". Craig who seemed to be the spokesman for the group replied" thanks, we are very hungry our food supply was running low so we haven't had a full meal in several days." They fell in line with everyone picking up paper plates to fill. As the new arrivals moved through the buffet line Linda turned to her husband commenting the amount and variety served rivaled the local restaurant in town. Craig agreed. The evening meal consisted of rice, potatoes; several varieties of vegetables followed by chicken casserole and baked ham. The thing that impressed them most was homemade biscuits and pies. Taking seats at the tables, they began to talk with others about where they were from and how they felt relived to meet up with other people. Troy told them "if you get the opportunity get Kathy to show you her journal of the trip they have made from Texas until now. She has documented their journey with photos and day-to-day listings of their encounters." Craig looked at Troy and said, "you speak as though you didn't leave Texas with them."

"No, they rescued us from a place called Cedar Point"

"Rescued you?"

"Yes, a group of us was pinned down on a small point of land surrounded by the lake. We had been there for weeks and our supplies were running low. Every time someone would try to leave for supplies, the local self-proclaimed president would have one of

his snipers shoot at us. Were in position to keep them from over running us but we couldn't break out for freedom."

"So, what happened?"

"Well the train crew risked their lives to get us out, and in the process, they blew the president and his followers plus the entire town to bits."

"They blew the town up? Really, that is amazing."

"You should get some of the others to tell you how they got here; it will make your hair stand up."

The six new members looked at each other in amazement with Carla finally speaking.

"The collection of people here works so well together it appears that you have been friends for years".

"I think it is because we view this as a chance to start over with our lives and the world in some respect, that we are thankful for this chance and don't want to mess it up."

The meal began to wind down and it was time for the meeting to start. As Steve climbed to a make shift platform the noise faded to a mummer. "Folks, he began I would like to thank each of you for all of your hard work this day and every day. We have been covering a lot of ground lately and the chance to talk and visit among us has been limited. I have a few things I would like to present tonight and open up for discussion. First by our best estimate, we are just over a hundred miles from our point of destination." This brought a huge roar of satisfaction from the crowd." With our goal so close to being achieved, it might be a good time to make a few adjustments to our movements. First, I have located a town about twenty miles from here, the atlas list it as a population of twenty thousand. I would like to suggest a scout team check this town out as a possible location for us to hole up for a short time". Small ripples of talk moved throughout the crowd. "The reason for this is it might be wise to send another scout team on to Asheville and the Biltmore to check it out. This would prevent us from walking into something we may regret. I am sure you folks from

Cedar Point understand what I mean by that. It was a narrow escape for us, if we are caught in the mountains it would be the end of us all.”

From the center of the assembly came a voice.” What kind of time are we talking about?”

“I think a week or two. I hope no more than that because we need to start preparing for winter. By holding up in this town, we can clean it out of everything that can be of value and rest ourselves for the work that is ahead upon arrival.”

Another question was put forth. “Will we be safe stopping for that long?”

“We will need to fortify a section of town plus keep scouts out to watch for any trouble. I think it will be our best choice. However, this is open to any suggestions.”

From the back a voice was heard,” I agree with Steve, if we all pile into Ashville and someone is there they might look at us as invaders and start firing without asking what our intentions are.”

Another voice,” I agree to, let’s go with that plan.”

Steve now waved his hand and said, “Would you like to put it to a vote now or study on it awhile.”

From the center a voice came,” let’s have some more pie and coffee and vote in a few minutes”. Laughter rippled in the meeting. Steve leaned over pretending to strain his eyes; finally saying, “Is that you Marshall?” Now laughter broke out in waves as Marshall red faced nodded his head.” All right let’s take a short break and meet again, I also have a few other things to suggest”. Marshall bounced back,” well then you better open the beer car again cause the beer tub is low.” Again, the collection laughed as they rose to their feet.

The meeting resumed with each person in agreement that this was the best plan for the final leg of the journey. This topic put away, the next one brought to the table was that of winter preparation. Steve now asked Kathy and Tami to stand and give reports on the status of things. Tami began with the current inventory of everything from food and

hygiene to the amount of fuel on hand. At closing, she stated, "we need to collect everything we can before winter closes the few roads that are open and the supplies are ruined by exposure to the weather." Next Kathy stood with her binder in hand. "We have a broad range of talent with us and I am confident we will make it." This brought a mummer of approval. "With so many tasks at hand, I would like to suggest we use the team method that has worked in re-supply operations of the past. Some of you are new to the group but we will put your skills to good use. If I could meet with the following people after we adjourn," she began to read several names; After Kathy completed her portion of the meeting Steve stood up asking if there were any other items for discussion. A few questions about guard duty and the water supply were worked out. The final question concerned the livestock. With no other discussion, the meeting closed.

Supplies issued to the new arrivals and the campfires dying low Steve and Kathy were sitting in a chase lounge having a glass of wine. James and Philane strolled up asking if they were interrupting. "No by all means, pull up a chair and have a glass."

"Thanks." They settled into the area around the fire about the time Robert and Marsha walked up, "come on in we are just shooting the breeze", Steve called out. They collected chairs and joined the conversation. James began, "do you have anyone in mind for the recon team to go to Ashville."

"No, I thought I would see how many volunteered and pick from them."

Kathy spoke up; "he ain't going I will tell you that. He has been out front from the very start and I think it's time someone else took a few chances."

"Well I guess that settles that", Steve grinned.

"I would like to go", Robert spoke up, "that's why I came by, to see if I could be part of the team". "Count me in" James added.

"Well that's two we need two more and its set. Plus we need a team to check out Simpsonville. I really want two experienced people for that job as well so if one of you

would like to head up that team that's good by me.”

“I will do the town”, Robert said.

“Good then it's settled.”

As they were making plans, Jose came over asking if he could speak to Steve. “Sure Jose what can I do for you? “

“Well, I know I have been with all of you a short time but I feel like I should do my part.”

“Jose you and Raquel were out on guard duty today when we passed by and I see you helping Marshall with the stock and if memory serves me right tonight Raquel was in the detail cleaning up after supper.”

“Yes, that is true but we feel it is important to do our part, so I want to go on the scouting mission.”

“Jose, what did you do before the war?”

“I was a farmer “

“Well right now Marshall and you are the only farmers we have. We are going to depend heavily on the two of you to help us get crops in for our stock and ourselves. If something happened to you, we could suffer in the long run. I think if you stayed here and helped us get all of the farming equipment and supplies from the town we are going to stop in, you would be more help to us than having you out front.”

“OK, I see your point. But I am ready to go if you need me.”

“Thanks for the offer.”

“By the way Steve, I asked Marshall why you named the bull Barbara; he laughed until I thought he was going to die. Finally he said to ask you.”

Laughter erupted from all present, finally James said, “I have wondered that myself. I know there is a story in there somewhere.”

Kathy got up saying, “it looks like we are going to need more beer if you get him started on that,” laughing as she walked away.

"I'll help you", Philane said jumping to her feet.

The two women strolled toward the tub holding the drinks and talked about searching for any left over food for a late night snack. As they passed a small, gathering one of the men called out to Kathy, "Where is Steve at?"

"He is over by that group of trees", she replied pointing to a small cluster of oaks.

"Thanks, I need to speak with him."

"Go ahead; there is a group of them shooting the breeze."

As they moved toward the tub, she spotted Mark and Marci. She shouted to him and the pair walked over. Kathy smiled saying, "there is a good bull session going on at our tent, they are asking him about Barbara the bull."

"Well we better get over there and be sure he gets it right."

"We are picking up some more beer and maybe some snacks."

"I'll give you a hand ", Marci offered.

When the three women returned to earshot of the party, Jose was saying amid the laughter, "my brother Carlos had the rope also, and my brother Miguel was holding me by the legs, the steer was dragging us like three water-skiers. Finally we turned lose of the rope and that steer wasn't seen until two days later." Laughter roared and the party had grown to about fifteen. The campfire lit and the stories were rolling in hysterical form. "Well we made this trip", Marci announced setting the bottles of *Bud Light* and cans of *Pringles* down in the center of the ring. "Next trip is on someone else." Kathy followed up with two CO2 extinguishers giving each of the three twelve-packs a short burst. "Yep!" She said, "Next trip is on whoever drinks the most."

Steve announced he was going to take a stroll through the campsite to check on things. As he collected his gear, Kathy took his arm saying she would walk with him. The pair moved among the dying fires and sounds of conversations with varying topics. As they approached the cluster of tents where Craig and the new arrivals had

settled for the night, Craig motioned them over. "I just wanted to say thanks again for coming to our rescue. I don't think we would still be alive if it wasn't for your group."

"Glad we were able to get there when we did"

"Do you think I did the right thing today when I shot that teen at the tree?"

"Well he and his friends had killed several members of your party. They would have killed more if they hadn't been stopped."

"I know but I shot him point blank while tied to a tree."

"I was there, what other options did you have, if you turned him loose he would have killed the next person that he came in contact with. Wes said the stuff they were taking makes them pure crazy after a while."

"I guess you're right but I never killed anyone before."

"I was a railroad conductor before all of this; do you think I have ever killed before? We are all different now and the fight to survive is changing us all. The thing to hold on to is in the end we are going to make a better world for everyone, right now we have to do what we have to do. I look at it like the soldiers in war, they don't like their job but the evil must be stopped."

"Thanks, for listening."

"Did everybody get enough to eat?"

"Plenty said Carla "I ate until I thought I was going to pop!"

"Well tomorrow we will get gear and clothing for all of you. Sleep well tonight."

The couple moved on across the area checking on things as they went. Was everybody OK, did they need anything. Kathy spoke to him in a soft voice "we have almost a hundred people now and they are pulling their own weight, don't worry so much."

"This was my idea and I feel responsible"

"Things are going fine and we will all be OK."

"Alright I will try to relax, but I still worry about leading them into an ambush and getting everyone killed."

"Just remember we vote on everything so the responsibility is shared."
He tapped her on the shoulder point toward three people moving across the compound. It was Ryan, Sara and Tiff moving in a line. "That little stud", he said, "taking two girls with him to relieve the guards."

You have been spending too much time at the front. The girls want to do their part and it seems better if two girls are together than one girl and two guys."

"Makes sense to me"

"But OH! Observant one, Ryan and Sara have been spending a lot of time together."

"Really "

"Yes, really."

"How about that "

"And Joey and Christa,"

"Well, I remember Sister Carol saying once they have been sweet on each other from about grade seven."

"Yesterday while you and Mark were checking out the train, Marshall's daughter told Matt she would teach him how to ride **Comanche style**."

"I hope she was talking about the horses," laughing as he pointed toward the evening guards coming in from their various locations. "See", she said, "things are running smoothly."

"OK, a quick lap by the far side and we will call it a night." Moving quietly to avoid disturbing the guards and the ones that had turned in. the pair walked along the backside between the tents and the grazing livestock. Robert came ridding up, he was ridding night heard with his son Charlie. "Something's wrong over there", pointing to a cluster of trees, "but I don't want to leave the stock. " "We'll check it". Turning to Kathy

Steve said "I will go first and you move in about twenty yards behind me for cover, don't fire unless I fire first." "Gotcha", she nodded pulling her 9mm from its holster. In stealth like manor, he began to work into the trees. The sound was a woman pleading and a man swearing. The man drew his hand high in the air and came down on the woman. Rushing forward Steve took the CAR-15 and smashed the stock to the back of the man's head before he could raise his fist again. The man rolled over falling to the ground like a sack of potatoes. Kathy hearing the commotion rushed forward *Glock* at the ready. Spying the woman on her knees and the man on the ground, she knew instantly what had transpired. She also knew if she did not stop her husband, he would beat the man to death. Grabbing him by the arm she said, "Go get Wes and Mark, I'll watch him and if I have any trouble Wes will have two patients to treat." Turning to her, he said, "I'll be right back if he tries to get up blow his fucking head off." As he said this to Kathy, she was leaning over the downed man. Kathy pulled a small flashlight from her pocket pointing it in the face of the groggy and badly shaken man. It was Kirby. "Buster you don't know how close to death you just came." She never felt good about him, and Weston and Sasquatch always growled when he was in the area. Wes sprinted to the aid of the woman with Mark following a few steps behind.

When the sun was peaking over the horizon, many of the campers were stirring and the morning crew began the task of preparing breakfast. It had been an uneventful night for them, but Kirby could not say the same. After Wes treated Phyllis, he took her back to the train where Blanca and Marci sat and talked with her until she fell asleep. The moment Phyllis left the area Steve and Mark beat Kirby to an inch of his life and tied him to a tree until the decision could be made as to his fate. Walking toward the train for coffee Mark said, "I wish I had used a tree limb like you did, my fist hurts now and I can hardly close my hand."

CHAPTER 23

Marci pulled twelve names from a bowl as each person came forward she asked if they could be fair in the hearing, the twelve agreed to hear both sides of the story. Jeff had been selected to serve as judge and it was felt by all parties he was the most qualified to render a fair judgment due to his strong background in religion and philosophy. As the hearing began, Kirby now brought forward under guard and seated at a table. Jeff called the meeting to order by striking a heavy coffee cup on the table, he was seated facing the assemblage. When the crowd settled down, he asked Sister Carol to open the hearing with a prayer. Next, he spoke to Kirby questioning him if he had anyone to represent him. Kirby still showing the marks from last night's beating shouted "Fuck all of you; you are going to do what you want anyway!" Jeff slammed the cup to the tabletop saying in a loud voice "There are women and children present and you will watch your language!" turning to Kathy, Jeff directed her to stand and tell in her own words what she had witnessed. Kathy now moved to the front of the group standing to the side where everyone could see her. She calmly told what had happened and how she sent Steve to get Wes to render medical aid to Phyllis. Next Steve gave his description telling how he along with Mark had tied Kirby to a tree because there was no place to lock him up. It was clear to all that a large amount of emotion was in his voice as he gave each detail of what had happened. Next Mark gave his account of what he had seen and his actions. He concluded his statement saying, "When I seen Phyllis and what she looked like I wanted to shoot him on the spot but I knew it wouldn't be right." Wes concluded the testimony and gave complete details as to what he did in treating Phyllis's injuries. Jeff now asked if anyone could offer any other information that might have a bearing on this hearing. Several people spoke up saying they had known both of them for a long time and this was not an isolated incident. Jeff now put forth the question "can anyone speak on Kirby's

behalf". No one made a sound. Turning to Kirby, Jeff now asked him again if he could offer any statement to the jury for consideration. "I've got nothing to say to any of you!" the words were more spit at the group than spoken.

When the jury returned the time elapsed had been thirty minutes. Susan elected to serve as the representative. "We feel beyond the shadow of a doubt he is guilty, however we also debated the punishment and would like to offer our punishment as a suggestion." "Please continue", Jeff said. She began "we don't have a jail to lock him up in. Money is of no value and we don't feel this rates the death penalty. So we would like to suggest he be banished from the community as we discussed one night in the gym, when the team from Cedar Point and the others at the meeting agreed to follow the Ten Commandments plus the Constitution." With that, she took her seat. "Is there anyone that would like to speak before the sentence is handed out," Jeff polled the crowd. Several spoke up in favor of the juries recommendations. Jeff now tapped the cup on the table and looking straight at Kirby he said, "This hearing will follow the suggestion of the jury and also add that after three days from your banishment you will be shot on site and furthermore anyone found rendering aid to you will be banished also. I now ask the scouting party to deliver him to freedom at a distance from here as to the point he cannot return. I also ask that a bundle of supplies be deposited at that site to allow him a means of surviving. With that, this hearing is adjourned"

The scouting parties prepared to move out as planned Robert and Matt pulled a *Gator* to the rear of the highrailer attaching it to the boom and lifting it a few feet from the track. Next, the town scouts along with Kirby climbed into the back as the Ashville crew assumed positions inside the cab. Giving a wave to the crowd, they drove off.

The focus now appeared to be on Steve as the daily chores began to take shape others waited for further instructions." Let's get things organized so when the

town team returns we won't lose any precious time." What should we do first came a voice? Steve suggested, "We need to arrange a place that we can sit and discuss our strategy." "How about the dining tables," came a suggestion? "Good call, let's meet there."

The procession moved into the setting area as Kathy brought a binder filled with information collected as the people joined the train. Steve stood on a chair asking everyone to pull their chair into a circle, so we can see and hear each other. As the circle formed up Steve began by saying, "I always feel uncomfortable telling people what to do but this is a system that has worked well in our past resupply trips into other towns."

"Go-ahead", Larry said "you have done a good job in taking us this far". Several voices added agreement to his statement.

"Well here goes, Kathy spoke with each person as they joined the group and she has a list of jobs and skills. What I would like to do is have the work assignments match the most capable people. For example, she reports we have two mechanics in our mist. I would like for the two people along with two other volunteers to go through each auto and supply store collecting anything they feel we may need in the future. By breaking down the jobs into designated groups, the supplies can be kept together and we will not be carrying things we don't need. Does everyone understand?"

"Sure that makes sense", Troy spoke up, "if not we are more like looters that resupply."

"Exactly and after we complete our resupply portion then people can go in and collect any items they want for themselves."

"Like a free shopping day."

"Sure"

"OK then let's get on with the plan".

“All right, first your job is to locate and place the items in front of the stores; you don’t have to bring it to the train. We are going to run a shuttle of trucks through town to pick up all of the cargo. A group driving wreckers will clear the streets or front loaders or whatever we need to move obstructions. Everybody good on that?”

“Yes came the reply as heads nodded.”

“When the team returns from town they should have maps and phonebooks to help in locating the places we need to go. The first team will be the street cleaners we need four people to do this and ten or more that can drive *U-Haul* or *Ryder* type trucks to shuttle the supplies.” Hands went up and Kathy began to make note of the volunteers.

“Sister Carol you did a great job refueling the trucks last time, would you do it for us again?”

“I would be glad too”

“Next, we need six people to work in the rail yard helping the train crew move cars and driving forklifts loading cars.”

The discussion carried on for over an hour as the details worked out regarding the order of supplies and who would be supervising what was needed. During this time, the guards had changed and the afternoon cooking team began to prepare the meal. Noon meals were usually light, making the cooking less work. It was becoming an ordeal feeding nearly one hundred people with the primitive kitchen equipment used. As the meeting began to taper to the end, Steve was surprised that no one had mentioned Kirby. However, he also felt that the people had spoken, and the verdict was overwhelming. This had been the first true test of their system of government and it had worked. Setting at a table with Jeff and Mark, they discussed the plans for the train loading. It was difficult to make plans without seeing the yard, and knowing the shape it was in and what cars were available. As they drank coffee and drew on a sheet of paper the planning and order of things became clear. This supply mission

was going to be the most important one of all. Much of the things they would need for winter would need to come from this stop.

Steve along with Jeff and Mark had arranged to meet with the person in charge of each detail of the supply operation. They talked about the amount of supplies needed and the number of railcars expected to complete the task. Phyllis, who still had signs of last night's beating, came to the table asking if she could talk with them for a moment. "Of course, please sit down," Mark offered her a chair. She began, "thanks for coming to my aid, I am worried that now without him I may not survive." "What do you mean", Jeff asked. "It is going to be hard starting over and it is going to be hard living without the modern conveniences that we have all been accustomed to". Jeff studied her for a moment, responding, "you won't be alone you have plenty of friends here and I am sure some of the single women here may want to become roommates with you. This will be a new adjustment for all of us. You aren't going to end up living alone in a small shack somewhere. We are most likely going to be living in the big house for some time." She smiled at him saying, "I never thought of it that way, this could be the best thing that ever happened to me." Patting him on the hand, she stood smiling even more saying thanks again.

The final meeting of the day was with the logistic team. This team was to secure food and equipment for the time they would be staying in Simpsonville. As in cases past a school would be the ideal location due to the cafeteria for eating and meetings plus the classrooms offered an amount of privacy for sleeping. Marshall and Jose had already requested a school for using the athletic fields to graze the stock in a fenced in area.

"Well there is nothing to do now but watch and wait", Steve said as he pulled a small cigar from his pocket. "You know in a few weeks these things won't be fit to smoke." Jeff nodded in agreement, "yep, just watch and wait." The three men walked across the campsite pausing to watch several of the children kicking a soccer ball at a

makeshift goal. Mark turned to the others saying, "We have done a good job in keeping things together." "It seems like years ago when our lives were normal," Jeff answered in reply. "We should rest while we can, when the town team returns the work is going to get hard for a long spell."

As the train group settled in for their news, the time offered to them was restful.

CHAPTER 24

The town team had reached the drop off point. Robert lowered the *Gator* from the boom as Matt collected the gear. James and the others pulled a large camouflage tarp in preparation to cover it for their return trip to the train. Each member of the teams wished each other good luck and Godspeed. Before the highrailer pulled, away Robert looked into the back where Kirby was tied to the boom support saying to him, "if it was up to me I would have shot you and if I ever see you, again that is exactly what I'll do." James nodded in agreement and walked around to the cab motioning to Robert as he went. "We plan to give him a little send off before he goes." With a smile, Robert knew it would be an ass beating, which was ten times the beating he gave his wife.

The pair now began to move toward the town. Pausing Robert told Matt "the track the highrailer is here", pointing to a map, "the spur line leading into town is this one he pointed, we need to work along this area to see the yard. The tower will give us a good observation point and should be a good place to spend our first night."

Matt nodded, "when do you think we will be able to tell about the town itself."

"I'm not sure, if we can locate a tall building near the center of town we could try for it under the cover of darkness and study the town from first light."

"If they are people, there how will we know if they are good or bad?"

“If there is anyone, we will just pull out and take the train another route.”

“We can’t afford to get caught in one these valleys by a group of bad guys. They would block each end of the track and pick us off one by one. So we are going to assume from this point on that everyone is a bad guy unless we can tell for certain they aren’t”

“That makes sense to me.”

The duo worked along a creek bottom until it reached a small grove of trees near the yard limits. From this point, it was a fifty-yard sprint to the first cut of cars. When they reached the cars, Robert told Matt “it is going to be close quarters from here to the tower. I am going to use my shotgun for protection.” Moving as quiet as possible in the ballast they worked from row to row until only one cut of cars remained between them and the tower. “Let’s hold up here for a moment and see if there is any movement” Matt found an empty boxcar and crawled into it, sliding on his belly he made his way to the door on the opposite side. Remaining in the shadows, he now had a good line of sight to the tower and the steps leading up to it. Telling Robert, as he pulled his binoculars from the pack “I will keep an eye on this if you want to watch for other things.”

“Good plan, I will watch our backs”

“How long do you think it will be before we know if it is safe to move?”

“About two hours, then we will try for the tower.”

They remained on the hard wooden floor of the car without speaking until Robert said, “Alright, let’s go to the tower.” Inside the tower, Matt began to sweep the area looking for the faintest signs of life. Robert began at once collecting maps and phonebooks stuffing them into old briefcase taken from a shelf. “I’m not sure which map does what so I’m taking one of everything’. He also took a legal pad making quick notes of how many and what type of cars were in the yard. As he scurried around the office, collecting information, Matt kept a constant search of things, reporting that the tallest

building appeared to be five floors tall and about ten blocks away.” Another thing, it looks to me they have a park in the center of town.”

“That could be a help for clearing streets and storing things until they can be loaded.”

“Do you see anything that could be a school?””

“Not yet, I can see the hospital and a huge church.”

“How tall is the steeple?”

“Almost as tall as the big building.”

“We might want to use it as an observation post if it has a better location.”

The pair settled down for a brief snack followed by more scanning of the town.

As the town team worked to complete their mission the Asheville scouting team moved onward lining switches and keeping on the alert for any signs of danger. When they had made thirty-miles from the town, James suggested it was time to release Kirby. Pulling into a siding, the team walked to the rear to untie him. As he climbed down, he swore he would get even with them if it took the rest of his life. Tom tossed the gear down from the truck checking it as he listened to the ranting of Kirby. Turning to him he said, “you have one 30-30 with a box of shells, a tent, ten days supply of food, matches and a flashlight.” He then added “I am also going to throw in some advice, if you want to get even with me now is the time because, if I see you again I promise to put a bullet right between your eyes”. With that, he hit Kirby using a right cross, sending him spinning to the ground. Kirby was still marked up from the beating Steve and Mark had put on him, but it apparently had not changed his attitude.” I ain’t going to forget this.”

“Well here is something else to remember, James said driving his large fist home. This action opened the door for the rest of the crew as they each landed punch after punch until Kirby was barely conscious. With his gear on the embankment, the team prepared to mount up. In one last act of defiance, Kirby yelled at them “you have to come back this way and I will be waiting for you.” Nodding his head Tom walked

over to him pulling a .22 from his holster, "you know, you are just dumb enough to wait here instead of heading out on your own." With that he pointed the gun at him, James yelled, "don't, it will be murder." Tom shot Kirby in the top of each foot two times. As he walked away, he said, "I only hope these woods are full of hungry bears or coyotes". With that, he took his position in the cab saying nothing for several miles.

CHAPTER 25

Robert signaled for Matt to move forward as the pair worked down the alley behind the *Carter Building*. Built in 1903 it was of heavy limestone construction resembling fortresses of old England. Reaching the rear entrance, they found the door locked but the glass was shattered. Talking among them as they traveled from the tower the decision that a chemical agent must have been used in the area. "Nothing seems destroyed but there are bodies everywhere." Robert observed. The pair now in position on the top floor of once a law office could observe most of the town easily. "I'll bet the rent on this office cost a pretty penny," Robert told Matt as they positioned chairs near the windows. With Matt taking the north and east, section of town he now informed Robert that the park was in reality a long strip of land running through the center of town with a railroad track in the center. Peering over his shoulder Robert studied the area with interest making notes on a pad of the surrounding; one thing that caught his eye was the caboose sitting brightly painted near a gazebo. "I want to take a closer look at that area as soon as we feel safe to move around".

"What is so special about that area?"

"Something is on the street and I can't make it out from here."

Both men were now straining through their binoculars but all they could make out from this point was large painting on the street. After a few moments, each resumed scanning the section of town from the vantage point. As time passed, it became apparent nothing was moving. Robert suggested a snack followed by a short rest period. The pair agreed that if nothing was spotted by late afternoon they were going to climb down and check the center of town out on foot.

The Asheville team moved onward keeping a wary eye on the sides of the mountains as the grade began to increase, the open section along the track narrowed to a point in some place where the clearance between the highrailer and the embankment was fifteen feet on each side. David was now driving with Tom working the switches when needed, although the track for the last several miles moved in a single line with no road crossings or sidings and few signal boxes. It appeared to them this section was a straight line void of anything that resembled civilization. James moved to the bed of the truck several miles back stating he could see further down the track because the cab blocked the view. Jason now had the backseat to spread out with the M60. The track began a slight downgrade and the long sweeping turn helped break the steepness of it. As they found themselves on a flat section of the region, the surroundings began to open up. When approaching a siding David suggested they stop for a meal and to trade drivers. "I know he said it sound funny to say but all you have to do is apply gas and brakes but this driving wears you out."

"Think of what it was coming all the way from Texas"

"I can't imagine"

"Well, what's for chow?"

Tom pulled the cooler from the rear of the truck as Jason retrieved the camp stove out of the side compartment. The afternoon meal consisted of stew, canned fruit topped off with granola bars.

"How far do you think we have to go?"

“I’m not sure but, I would like to find some place to settle in for the night soon.”

“I haven’t seen a thing for miles”

“Now that we are in a valley, maybe something will pop up.”

They moved on at a rate of thirty miles an hour not seeing any type of structure. When the grade began to climb the track changed to a single line again. Around a sharp bend, the team encountered a stalled train. Slowing to a stop everyone looked at each other in question. David posed the question that was on the minds of all. “How do you pass a train when both of you need the same track.” After a few moments, James said, “I guess we back up until we find a crossing and travel by road until we get around it.” “Sounds like a plan” David said as he put the highrailer in reverse.” Keep an eye out for me he said I don't want to hit anything.” The other three members of the party broke out in laughter. It was Tom who said, “you are on a railroad track with a truck that steers its self and we haven't see a living thing all day what are you going to hit?” David now grinning at his comments quipped, “What was I thinking; it is going to strange driving backward and not seeing or steering.” Tom answered, “Maybe two of us should ride in the back and bang on the roof when you need to start slowing down for a crossing.” David now gaining the upper hand said, “That’s what I meant all along.” “Bullshit”, came back Tom. The journey back took about twenty minutes when they slowed at a small road that by appearance suffered neglect for years. “Well” James offered, “It don't look like much but it must go somewhere.”

“Yep, but do we go left or right?”

“Let's get the atlas out and see if it is on it.”

“I doubt it, but let's try to find out what is in the area.”

Spreading out the signal map and the atlas on a flat rock, James pulled a compass from his pocket and began to orient the maps. After a few moments, he suggested they travel a mile down the road in the direction to the left. “If we don't see

anything that looks promising, we will come back and travel a mile in the other direction. This will help us find what is around us. All we need to do is move about a mile up the line and get back on the track." He oriented the railroad map and the atlas. The others peered at his workings. Next, he jotted the reading onto the corner of the map, turning to face the right portion of the road he now noted the compass reading below the first. Repeating the process, he added the left bearing. "So what is with the compass work", Tom asked?

"Well, the first is the route taken by the track, this will help us find the way back if we travel too far away from it. The others are the directions we will travel in search of a road to bypass the train. If we need to backtrack, all I have to do is add 180 degrees to this bearing and it will bring us back here. If we find the road we need I can add 90 degrees to it to get the correct direction of travel."

"Pretty slick."

"I wasn't a Boy Scout for nothing."

"Which way do you want to go first?"

"Let's try to the right "

The crew climbed into the highrailer and Tom turned the big truck down the narrow road. After a half-mile, a small concrete bridge came into view beyond the tree line. The road was showing its age, with grass and weeds encroaching on the sides plus the low hanging limbs indicated that maintenance was a long time over due. Bringing the highrailer to a halt about twenty feet short of the bridge everyone dismounted moving forward with weapons at the ready. David and Tom took positions along the railings as James and Jason moved across at a slow pace with weary eye for movement. The area on the far side was burned heavily as far as the eye could see. The fire had stopped when it could not cross the stream that measured thirty feet wide and chest deep on the average. Pulling the field glasses from his pack, James studied the terrain for several minutes. All he could find was charred stubble of trees

and large grass areas void of any color other than black, when he dropped the glasses from his eyes he turned to Jason and said, "This fire has covered a huge area, I can't see any place that is not burned. I don't see any reason to continue in this direction." With that, the pair returned and informed the others of what they had found. "Back to the tracks and head in the other direction", James said as they turned the highrailer around on the narrow road.

The area opposite the tracks proved more promising, the crew found the road to be in about the same shape as before but after a mile, it opened to a valley that appeared too remained untouched. They moved at the pace of thirty miles per hour. James and Jason had moved to the bed of the truck for better visibility. In the distance, a small farm came into view. Scanning the area surrounding it the team noticed horses in a pasture next to the house and cattle in a pasture across the road. James and Jason dismounted and began to work their way along a tree line toward the house. The plan was to have the truck approach the house and see if anyone was home. If the situation became hostile, the pair could provide covering fire creating a diversion for their escape.

Pulling into the driveway Tom and David approached the door with their hands in an upward manner, neither carried a rifle but each had a sidearm within reach. Calling out as they approached the duo received no response. They entered the house walking through it and waving to James and Jason the all clear signal from the back porch. David moved to the barn for a check, finding the pasture gate open as he passed by. The barn was vacant but intact with all necessary tack and supplies to keep things going. Exiting, he now moved into the pasture through the open gate. The horses at the far end of the field now began approaching him. The windmill continued to operate filling the water tank. David stopped to drink from the flowing spout. James with Jason now joined him. The water was fresh and cold. "I would say" James remarked, "This is a deep well to produce water this cold".

“What’s Tom Doing?”

“Checking the rest of the house, it looks like they opened the gates to turn the stock out and just ran away.”

“What the house like”

“They took time to gather a few things but mostly everything is still there.”

“We could stay in the house for the night, get the stock taken care of and push on tomorrow.”

“Sleeping in a real bed would be a nice change”

Entering the house they found Tom had been scouring the kitchen for food. The table piled high with cans and glass jars brought up from the basement. “Gotta love these farm families”. He said as they surveyed the goods. Tom suggested he and Jason feed the livestock and secure the gates to keep them from leaving. James agreed and the pair left the room. Turning to David, he said, “I will try to turn on the gas if you will start cooking the evening meal.”

“That’s a deal; we have a nice variety of food to choose from. It will be a change from the trail food we have been eating.”

“Well, Chef David I am sure we won’t be disappointed.” He said over his shoulder as he exited the backdoor. It turned out the people abandon their home with such a hurry the gas had not been turned off at the tank. James yelled back to the house “try it now”.

“It’s good came the reply.”

Moving in the direction of the barn, he met Tom and the pair discussed the livestock.

“They are in good shape, I gave them feed, but they have been doing well grazing and the water supply has been constant.”

“It looks like to me the family just threw open the gates and left them on their own.”

“We can’t take them with us and we don’t know how much farther we have to go. Do you think they will be okay until we return this way?”

“We can make every preparation for them and hope so. You can never tell by the time we return the family may have returned.”

“I don’t know how many are in that family or where they went, but they didn’t take much stuff, judging by what they left behind.”

“Looking at the bedrooms, I guess parents, two girls and a boy. But, that is just a guess. You are right they didn’t take much.”

Jason joined them reporting that the cattle numbered ten or eleven. “They won’t stand still and let me count them,” he murmured.

“Well shame on them”, James laughed.

The trio entered the house where the chef had pots simmering on the stove as he worked to open a jar of pear preserves. Everyone gathered around the kitchen table helping themselves to cups of coffee. James began to outline the activities for the remainder of the day. “I think we should back the truck into the barn so it can’t be seen and we will need to stand a security watch through the night. This might be the only building for miles and it may attract others, who know the family may return. “

“Anyway, Tom added,” we get to sleep in real beds tonight.

CHAPTER 26

Robert and Matt now crossed the street to study the painting they had been trying to read for the last three hours. In bold red letters, covering one lane of the street read “**48 survivors heading west**”. Looking at each other Robert spoke “well I guess we have that questioned answered”. They spent the remainder of the day locating the things needed to support the train and resupply the group. Spending the night in

Cobb's Sporting Goods Store they moved around the town checking and making notes to brief everyone at their return. Medical information for Wes, Shirley and Jan. Farm supplies for Marshall and Jose. The list continued to grow filling several pages. At last, Robert said, "we better start back so we can make it before night fall. I sure don't want to get shot by a nervous guard." "Me either" add Matt. Strolling down the street without a care in the world, the pair a mere six blocks from the rail yard spotted two coyotes crossing the street in front of them. Neither person rose to fire at them but, each looked at the other with a quizzical expression. Robert finally spoke "I guess they survived and with no one to keep them away they began to forage for food in town. This means several things, one our livestock will now be in danger and two other game is most likely out there."

Starting the *Gator* Matt settled into the driver's seat as Robert checked the gear one more time. Settling in the seat, he remarked, "Just because it was clear on the way up, doesn't mean it will be on the way back. Someone else may have crossed our trail." Matt nodded pulling on to the service road. After they traveled for about an hour, Robert turned and pulled a bag of trail mix, several packs of crackers and a jar of peanut butter. Handing some to Matt he joked, "It ain't train food but we should eat our next meal there." At the half-mile marker, they stopped the *Gator* and set out on foot for the remainder of the distance. Robert told Matt that this was to let them walk up the track and not alarm the sentries with a lot of loud noise. In addition, "if they don't challenge us it could mean something has happen to them."

Closing the distance to the camp, the challenge came in a loud booming voice. "FLASH". "THUNDER" shouted Robert in an equally loud voice. Matt turned to Robert "where did those words come from?" "Well Steve reads a lot of history and those were the sign and countersign used by the troops during the Normandy invasion during World War II. So if it worked for them it should work for us." Rushing forward to meet them was Larry. "I am glad to see the two of you," he shouted in a voice that

carried like a bass drum. "We are glad to be seen ", answered Robert chuckling. Matt tapped Robert on the shoulder telling him he was going back to get the Gator. With that, he sprinted down the track leaving his gear behind. Larry turned to the others on watch asking for someone to run to the train and tell them the *Town Crew* was back. Sandy answered back that Carla was already gone.

Walking toward the checkpoint Larry was posing Robert with a hundred questions at once. "What did you find, is anyone there, is there enough supplies to keep us going..." Robert tried to answer them as they came but finally he just said let's wait so I can tell everyone at once." By the time they reached the lookout, the sound of Matt approach was close. Turning to Larry, he said, "I know you will still be on guard when I tell the group, but rest assured we are going to be alright." With that, he climbed into the *Gator* and the pair rode the short distance to camp.

The crowd gathered as to welcome home the *Apollo Astronauts*. Marsha rushed forward nearly knocking him off his feet and Matt was pulled aside by Marshall's daughter, Michelle "I promised myself if you came back I was going to do this" she said and planted a big kiss on him. Matt looked shocked for a moment, regained his composure, and pulled her back to him planting an even bigger one on her. Moving toward the kitchen area the pair climbed up on a table made from two shipping crates joined by a sheet of plywood. Questions came at them from all directions. At last, the noise died down and Robert began to speak. He told them of the sign painted on the street adding that the people had moved away from the direction we would be traveling. Next, he went into detail about the condition of the town and ended his twenty-minute briefing by telling them he felt the town had enough supplies to carry them until they could get on their feet. Shouts rang out like the winning touchdown at the *Super Bowl*.

Steve now jumped to the table speaking, as the crowd was still intact." OK folks we just got great news, let's plan to pull out tomorrow. It will take the rest of the

day to break camp, load the train and so forth.” lunch concluded in less than an hour. The pair of weary travelers loaded paper plates with food placing them in a microwave powered by a generator. Roberts’s family sat surrounding him as he ate and Michelle now sat beside Matt in an obvious manor saying to the rest of the girls he is taken. Steve stepped up to the table asking them if they could meet with the planning committee in an hour. Both men agreed and Robert told him that he had maps and books along with two spiral notebooks of information on the *Gator* if they wanted to start looking them over.

The committee met on the serving table at the end of the kitchen area. Looking out over the field next to the track from this point a flurry of activity could be observed. First Robert spread out a city map taken from the town hall.

“This was the largest map I could find and we marked as much information on it as we could find. Here is the school and it will be perfect for a base of operations like those that we have done in the past. Good athletic fields for the stock. However, we did see coyotes when we were leaving so the stock will be in danger.”

“Did you see anything else?”

“No but signs of other animals were present. It looks to me that when the people moved out, some animals moved in to feed.”

“Any signs of combat or fighting?”

“No, the bodies we found were from the first strike. They were indoors and it looked like judging by the truck and backhoe, the survivors may have buried a large group in a mass grave near the edge of town”

“So, you think it is a go?”

“Yep, but because we are going to be there until the Ashville crew comes back we will have more time to work, so I was thinking, what if we work as a team on each item instead of splitting up.”

“That is a good idea.”

"There is a lot of stuff there we should be alright if we strip it to the bone."

"Now, the big question, did the Asheville crew get off alright."

"No problem, the planned to let their cargo go another twenty or thirty miles down the line from us to be sure we weren't interfered with."

"That's good no one has even asked about him."

"I gathered from James, they plan to send him off with a little encouragement not to come to Asheville ever."

"Well guys get some rest, you have certainly earned it."

With

plans to move out tomorrow several task were already in motion. The firewood crew was now collecting the solar powered yard lights from the tents and surrounding area to place back out into what had been "dubbed the light-garden". When all of the lights lined up to recharged, they resembled rows of short corn. Empty propane tanks were stacked along the track next to a mountain of empty boxes and bottles. Several people were getting their gear ready to load on the train. This had been the longest stay outside of a town the group had made. Wes had gone with a small team to top off the water barrels and break down the pump and hoses. Steve walked through the site with Kathy saying to her how it reminded him of the movie *The Greatest Show on Earth*. "Remember the scene where the circus is tearing down to move to the next show. Well this looks like that to me." She replied, "yes it does".

Mark and Marci joined them as they worked their way toward the engine consist. "We have traveled along way," Steve said to no one in particular. "Yes, we have", answered Mark. "I hope it all works out in the end." Kathy spoke now looking down the length of the train. "In my heart I feel we will, there are too many people pulling to hard not to." "I just wish we knew what is going on in the rest of the country," Steve added. As they spoke, Mark pointed toward Ryan walking with Sara.

"Looks like the love bug has bitten" Steve followed the point, adding "Well how about that, wonder when that took place". Marci spoke; "you men couldn't see an elephant in the bathtub. You two are always up front running the train, while we are in the back noticing things." They two women began laughing and each began to fill the men in on the activities. "Let's see Joey and Christa are in love and have been from the eighth grade, Tiff has a thing for Jason, she almost cried when he left with the Asheville team, Martha has a thing for Chuck, but he doesn't know it, Marshall's son has been helping Jose's daughter Anna with the stock a lot, and the biggest gossip of all is that Brenda and Carla are sharing a tent and maybe the same sleeping bag. That is the tip of the iceberg boys they giggled to one another." The guys looked at one another with Mark saying, "We have spent too much time away from the group."

Weston came running toward Kathy, chased by several young kids. He circled around her as though he was asking for help. When the kids arrived, she kindly told them, he needed some rest and could play later. As they dashed off to start a new game, the dog looked at her as if to say thank you. They talked for a few moments, with Mark and Marci heading toward the camping area. Weston was now at Kathy's heels keeping in stride with her every step.

CHAPTER 27

The highrailer stopped at the midpoint in the tunnel. James and Tom dismounted from the rear and began to review their plans for the last time. James along with Jason was to approach the Biltmore from the rear by traveling cross-country. At the same time Tom and David's plan was to secure a vantage point and study the city from every possible angle before entering it. Everyone agreed it would take several days to complete this part of the mission. Nevertheless, they all knew the importance

of it. It would be disastrous to lead the train into a hostile environment. With this in mind, they planned to study everything and collect all the data they could muster. The teams wished each other well, and promised to keep an eye out for the emergency flare. The flares taken from a boating supply store and could reach an altitude of six-hundred feet. Carried by members as an emergency distress device due to the fact radio communications were non-existence.

James followed by Jason left the tunnel moving east through the heavily wooded terrain. Traveling was slow for the first few miles as the undergrowth was heavy along the mountainside. Pausing for a drink of water Jason remarked how difficult hunting in this area would be. "A deer could be twenty feet away and you would never see it." He paused for a moment adding, "We better not get separated". Looking at his map and compass James motioned for them to head in direction by a large hickory tree. Commenting "we need to reach the summit to orient ourselves with the map, it will all so let us see what is going on, but remember don't step into any open area or stand on anything that will give our position away". The pair continued to climb along a steep trail until a break in the growth provided a welcome breeze. From this vantage point, they stopped for a mid-morning snack and study the terrain. James sketched the details on a legal pad taken from his pack. Jason now tied a small ribbon around a nearby laurel bush to mark the spot they stopped and to record a change of direction in the route taken. "We will not likely make it to the house tonight," James said looking at the map and the area. "It looks like rough going all the way."

"I wonder how Tom and David are making out."

"Not sure but if they try to circle the city and find a good observation point, it will be a slow go for them at first."

“Let’s press on, the map shows the house near *The Blue Ridge Parkway*

and we the have a lot of ground to cover.”

“Yeah! Rough and steep.”

Tom and David were struggling with the undergrowth as well. They were talking about how the area was burned in some locations but clear signs on chemical weapons had been used as well. Large amounts of decomposing wildlife filled the portion of the woods they now traveled in. Tom found a large outcropping near the summit. Pointing to David, he said, “this looks like a good observation post, from here we can see a large portion of the surroundings and a good section of the city.” David began setting the spotting scope and tripod on a large flat section of rock as Tom unfolded the pages of the road atlas showing the enlarge section of Asheville. This atlas along with the railroad maps were all of the printed information they possessed. The bulk of information at this point would be a series of sketches. However, they felt time to observe was needed before they just waltzed into the city, and perhaps a hornets’ nest of trouble. David was now making notes on the pad of objects to be used as reference points later when a more detailed map could be obtained. Tom scurried about preparing the shelter and preparations for camp. They expected to stay in this location for two days before moving to another vantage point, spotted by David through the scope. It was located at a ninety-degree angle to their present site allowing them to view down the streets that were only visible in limited range from the current location.

Turning to Tom, David commented on how well things were organized and he said that the rolling hills could provide pockets of chemical agents left behind.

“What do you think? “

“Maybe but it has been a long time from the attack until now surely it would have dissipated.”

“I guess you’re right it has been quite awhile. But I still see a large amount of remains in the low lying areas; I guess that is where most everyone was caught.”

They monitored their surroundings making notes until nightfall, settling into what would become a routine form the next several days.

CHAPTER 28

As the afternoon sun rose, the site at the train camp was that of preparation and excitement. The lunch shift had piled on the extra feedbag knowing that fresh supplies were just around the corner. Kathy had checked the kitchen roster and she was scheduled to be part of the evening meal team. She took the time now to climb on top of the train, taking photos for her journal. As she stood framing her next shot, she overheard several people talking below. Squatting at her vantage point, the conversation was about how glad they were to have made it this far. A young girl named Ann asked, “If the town ahead is as great as the two of them described why don’t we just stay there.” The older man listening to the conversation spoke up. “Anyone with a map can find that town and you may find yourself defending it or encircled by bad people. Were you with the group when they rescued the people at Cedar Point?”

“No.”

“Well let me tell you that was something to see, and if it happened there it can or probably has happened all across the country. This place is perfect, remote, well made and can be self-supporting. Trust me these folks know what they are doing, and if you are smart you will learn from them.” With that, he strolled down to one of

the freight cars, pointing inside. "Planning and organization that is what kept us alive this far."

As they moved away from the train, Kathy climbed down the ladder thinking what a compliment, if they only knew how worried we are leading people to a place where it could be a new beginning or a long journey to death. She shared the story with Steve when they met later in the day. He grinned as she told him, "If they only knew "he said shaking his head.

Tami and Blanca stopped by the table where several others were looking at the maps Robert and Matt had brought in. Tami spoke to no one directly; "we were talking and thought this might be a good suggestion." Looking up from the table Jeff responded, "Go ahead honey, speak up." "Well she began, considering this will be the last town we pass through and we don't know what Asheville will be like. We should take everything possible to start our new community. For example she continued not only books for school, but reference books and how -to -books, along with general reading. Blanca added, "Basically just strip the library clean. Next, she went on all types of clothing, linens and everything we can lay our hands on. This is not a resupply stop, it is going to be a equip your life stop."

"You know they are exactly right "Mark spoke up. "Instead of having small teams, we should have one big one concentrating on one item of need at a time. When we leave, there shouldn't be any store untouched." Wes suggested, "Let's take the map and start dividing the town into sections for loading and sections for living. Because we are going to be there until the recon, team returns and that could be weeks.

Moving to the dining area for more room the planning now took on the form of a full meeting. Jose and Marshall agreed the school grounds and football fields would do for supporting the livestock their biggest concern was for the coyotes and other predators the team had spotted. "They will need constant guarding because we can't afford to lose even one animal. How about if we convert a store into a stable, pinning

them up at night but letting them graze during the day.” Jose offered. “Like we did during the bad storm”, Marshall added. “The field house is next to the football field and practice fields,” Robert interjected, pointing to the map showing the location of the high school. Shirley now stepped forward asking about the hospital and any medical offices they may have spotted. Robert again pointed to the map, “this looks like the county hospital with surrounding clinics and several doctors offices along the street, noticing others gathering around the table he now went into more details here is the auto parts store and here is the location of a heavy equipment garage. Along this street are the car dealerships.” The briefing lasted for over an hour with everyone providing input and asking questions.

With the evening meal polished off, the campers were preparing for their final night in the valley. Several campfires burned larger than normal due to the trash and items to be left behind. In the distance, a variety of music could be heard, each person respecting the privacy of the others with the volume low. The dining area was a popular gathering spot with the supply of drinks and snacks. Steve and Kathy walked in that direction talking with people as they moved across the camping section toward the common area. Stopping to talk with Larry and his wife Pat, as they sipped cold beers taken from the nearby stream, Steve thanked him for all of the hard work they had put into the travels. Swapping a cigar for a *Bud Light* Steve joked; “the smoke will keep the mosquitoes away.” Kathy added “and your wife as well.” She tugged on his arm as they passed George and Carlyon’s tent with the muffled sounds of lovemaking. As they moved on, Kathy grinned, saying, “I bet when we get to town they find an empty room far away from everybody. Nudging her back he said “wouldn’t be a bad idea would it”. They found themselves stopping to talk with Alan and Karen they were waiting for Craig and Linda. The four of them planed to play cards and have a few drinks and enjoy the last evening before the hard work in town began. Making their

way to the dining area Wes and Blanca were sitting and talking with glasses of tea in hand." Well tomorrow is back on the road again," Wes, said as they approached.

"Yep! At least this time it will be short trip and we know what to expect."

"How do you think the Asheville team is doing?"

"I don't know, but they have a lot of dangerous work ahead of them."

"When do you expect them back?"

"I think it will take another three weeks, because of the travel time and the need to do a lot of recon work. Just the area around the estate will take several days. The city has a large area of small towns and tourist locations that may hold people coming in for supplies that may not want to live in the city. That is the way we will be at first if everything goes as planned."

"Well when we get things loaded in Simpsonville, it looks like we will have a little more down time."

"Yep! The thing that worries me most is the fact we are losing time to prepare for winter. There is so much to do food supplies, fuel for heating and cooking, feed for the stock and supplies to prepare for planting crops for next year."

"Don't forget defensive plans in case bad guys come a calling and medical equipment. I have been working with Shirley and Jan on a list of things that we need to establish a medical department."

"Great job, you know we should meet with all of the leaders of each field of specialty as soon as we get settled in town."

Kathy and Blanca had moved to the end of the table pulling out a legal pad and outlining things for a task they had been working on. It was at this time Robert and Marsha arrived looking for coffee and a snack; Matt with Michelle clinging to him as though he would run away if she turned loose of him in turn followed them. They also were looking for drinks and munchies. Catching hold of a bag of chocolate chip cookies and a few drinks, they settled at a table alone. Glancing at his watch Steve

noticed it was almost nine. "Time for the guard change", he mentioned to Wes. Wes pointed behind him and said, "Right on schedule". As the outer ring of people came into camp. "It is so nice to see people work together without someone running around giving orders," he said to Steve as they poured more tea. "Yes, it is, it really is" came the reply.

The last of the group boarded and everyone at their duty stations, Mark began to fire the diesel engines one by one. This took several minutes as he and Jeff move from locomotive to locomotive opening the cowlings, priming and firing each engine. The black cloud puffing from each stack soon gave way to a steady rumble as the engines warmed up. Robert had taken a position in the gun car but this time he manned a radio in place of the .50cal. it was Matt who along with Joey sat by the machinegun. With the highrailer gone the *Lead Dogs* rode on the front engine, the trip although a few hours in time was still taken seriously, no one took anything for granite. Steve had moved into position next to Robert asking him about conditions along the way and other points of concern. The train moved at the speed of about twenty miles per hour, with the terrain on a steady climb. Approaching a cluster of trees Robert pointed, "This is where we dropped off and hid the *Gator*." Speaking into the radio, he told Mark "about half a mile around the bend and we will be at the Yard Limit sign." The big diesels began to slow as the yard approached. A pre selected squad dropped off the gun car with Robert leading them; they secured the area and guided the train onto the track next to the station platform.

The group assembled on the platform as though it had been rehearsed. Robert jumped on top of a large shipping crate. Announcing to everyone that the town was about one mile up this street, he pointed to Cross Drive. "A small group of us can pick up transportation as other unload personal gear." After the announcement, he stepped down next to Steve asking, "How do you want to handle this". Steve replied, "You and Matt know the way around town, why not take a team and bring back

transportation, I will try to organize things here while you are gone". "OK, I will take Matt and six others and leave now." Steve now moved toward Mark who was climbing down from the cab.

"Can you and Jeff take a team to break up the train and prep the yard for loading?"

"Sure we can, there are about eight people that have helped us in the past, and I will get them now. We can begin walking the yard checking cars and deciding how to store the current ones. If we are going to clean this place out like we talked. It may be necessary to dump some of the cars on the yard of not needed freight and that will take time."

"Well time is one thing we may have plenty of."

"Don't worry bud; we will get the job done."

"I will be sure that you have a van so you don't have to walk to town."

"Well that is mighty neighborly of you."

"Hey, I'm a nice guy"

"Says who?"

After a few moments of verbal sparring, the pair went back to work. They had been friends and logged more miles together than either one wanted to admit. Kathy and Tami were already getting their workstation ready for the car loading. Others were breaking into their work group and still more had started to pile personal gear on the dock for pick up. Things were running smoothly thought Steve as he approached Wes. Wes had come from the old depot building that was now a warehouse for railroad equipment. Several of the seniors had taken the younger ones inside to entertain them, keeping them safe from the moving equipment and danger in general. Stopping to chat for a moment, they shared a packet of trail mix and bottles of water.

"Looks like thing are moving along "

"Yep! So far so good."

“It’s hard to imagine, we have come so far.”

“And look at all of the people we have picked up along the way.”

“Check that out”, Wes said pointing toward the yard. Kathy had taken up a position to photograph the yard and the people at work. This was part of the ever-growing journal; she kept of the journey from Texas.

“Have you ever looked through her records?”

“Not really”

“It is quite...”

Wes! Wes! Wes!... it was Maureen a ten year old girl running down the sidewalk from the depot. “It’s Papa Brant, something is wrong with him!”

The two men rushed toward the door, passing Maureen. Inside they found Brant slumped on the floor. Wes turned him on his back, placing his fingers on his neck feeling for a pulse. The other seniors had moved the children to the far side of the room. Steve now knelt down on the other side ready to help Wes. Wes looked up and said, “Nothing we can do, he’s gone”. He pointed to Brant’s nose and mouth, “See that, it means he had been dead awhile before he finally fell from the chair to the floor. I will get a blanket to cover him with and then we should prepare to bury him.” Steve walked across the room locating a heavy canvas tarp. “This should do to cover and move him when we can.”

Outside the buses and trucks were loading people and gear to transport them to the school. Steve stepped in to the door of the first school bus telling Larry the driver what had happen. Larry knew Brant from Cedar Point, looking at Steve he said, “You know he was seventy-eight and had worked hard all his life. I wish he could have made the trip and enjoyed his remaining years with us.” Steve shook his head saying, “Maybe the stress and strain of all that has happened was too much. Anyway, let’s get the kids and seniors loaded and away from here. Tell them on the other end what happened.” Walking back inside he found Wes collecting the remainder of the people

to be moved to the bus. After they were loaded, the pair sat talking as they waited for the truck to take Brant's body downtown where it would be buried in the cemetery. Steve looked at Wes as he lit a small cigar, "this is our first loss he said, we have had several wounded in firefights and a few injured on the trip, but this is our first death." Wes answered, "at least he died of natural causes, not at the hands of those crazy people back at Cedar Point, you know they would have shot him because he was old and couldn't work." As he spoke, the pickup pulled into the yard. The yard crew had been hard at work checking cars and moving them into position to load. The body of the train pushed back up the main line, leaving the small yard open for switching cars to handle the operation of cleaning out the town. When Jeff spotted, the two men carrying the canvas bundle out, he moved in their direction. Arriving after the body was loaded; Steve paused to brief Jeff on what had taken place. "We should give him a proper funeral," Jeff replied. "I thought so too, so I asked them to park the truck at the cemetery until we can find a coffin and get things prepared."

At the school, Marshall and Jose completed the sports fields and the field house to meet the needs of the livestock. They were in the process of recruiting help for the pending cattle drive from the tracks to the new pastures. Mike and a crew had readied the breaker box for the generator as soon as it could be located. Matt had taken the ladder truck parking it at the kitchen entrance he was ready to lay the water supply. Indoors rooms cleared and ready to meet the needs of the tenants. Lots of hard work going on here, they said to each other jumping from the truck. The driver headed toward the cemetery driving by a sketched map drawn by Robert. Blanca and Susan were at the lunchroom door working with a small group. They were cleaning the area and preparing to start storing food supplies. Wes stepped inside asking if they needed any help. "No" they answered, "Robert and a group took some rental trucks to a nearby store planning to return with enough food for today and tomorrow's meals. After that we should be in the resupply mode to take care of ourselves." Down

the hall, another team had cleared rooms on three hallways. Ready for sleeping quarters or storage as needed, "I get the feeling we aren't needed here either," Steve said." Well I know what we can do Wes shot back."

"Lead on maestro; let's catch a ride to the downtown area." Jumping on to a truck that was returning to a local convenience store the pair guided the driver to the city garage. "Now what", Steve asked, "Follow me." Wes grabbed the keyboard locating keys for the city wrecker and dump truck. Jumper cables in place the wrecker came to life with the dump truck following. The pick up now returned to its duties the pair readied themselves for action. As Steve was guiding the dump out of the bay, he spied something that made him grin. It was a snowplow. Motioning Wes over he said, "Work is going to be a lot more fun now." "OH!, you bastard", Wes laughed. "A man should enjoy his work" Steve smirked back. The pair pulled onto the street heading toward the school. Using the two-way radios in the trucks, they jabbed at each other the entire way. As they pulled into the schoolyard, Matt handed them a map saying, "Start here first" The road clearing duo roared off with map in hand and laughter in the air. Turning on to Main Street it was clear for several blocks, but in the distance an old Ford pickup was looming. Steve hit it sending the bulk of the truck across the street into the green common strip.

After lunch, the pair turned the trucks over to another pair of drivers and they settled into the more serious side of managing the problems. Mike had the power running and Wes was working with a crew establishing the water supply. In true form, fire trucks pumped the water from the city storage tanks through a series of hoses to reach the school. The photocopier provided maps for everyone to move around town. In the tower of the Presbyterian Church, lookouts were posted to keep an eye out for bad guys or the returning recon team. These observers changed every four hours to prevent fatigue and boredom from setting in. things began to come into play. The siren on the ladder truck sounded brining everyone to the school. It was at this point the

funeral for Brant began. A group of volunteers took a backhoe and dug his grave as other brought a casket from *Lyles's Funeral Home*. Doing the best they could his body was placed in the ground, but not covered until respects were paid. Jeff along with Sister Carol, read scripture and spoke of the gentle man they had known only too shortly. Others stepped forward speaking of the long associations they had with him. After a hymn, he was laid to rest.

As sunset approached, the work details trickled in to the school for a hardy meal. It was Marci standing on top of a table announcing that all of the kitchen appliances were working so tonight the *Chefs of the Railroad* had prepared a full course feast. Laughter, shouts, catcalls and whistles echoed down the halls. Troy stood on the table next shouting that hot water was available in the locker-room for anyone that felt like they may need a shower. Cheers and laughter filled the room as fingers were pointed at each other. Steve stood next saying "just a few remarks from me and the Ad-Hoc Committee." First if you would like some privacy tonight we ALL understand, but be-careful and don't get shot by the sentries. Next Robert and Matt spotted coyotes and other predators in town so don't go out unarmed. A series of sporting events as usual in every school stop will be held tonight along with card and board games in here. Last on a serious note we buried one of our own today, let's be careful and hope it will be a long time before this happens again. Thanks for all of your hard work."

CHAPTER 29

After five days of studying the city, Tom and David moved from the hillside into town. They had spotted only wildlife moving about, but one occasion David thought he caught a glimpse of someone. Moving parallel to the *French Broad River* on Hwy. 251,

they followed this route into the city until they reached Broadway. Their goal would be the rooftop of *The Sheraton Four Points* this elevation would give them a view of Hwy 25 & 70 plus I-240. To reach this point they planned to travel at night. Both men dreaded the thoughts of what the inside of the hotel might smell like but they also knew this was a great place for an observation post. Under the cover of darkness, they stepped through the shattered glass of the lobby and began their climb. Carrying as much gear as possible to reduce the number of trips, the pair grunted with each floor. With most of the windows blown out the wind current was strong as they reached the top floor. David suggested they stay on the floor to help with shade and visibility. Tom agreed, there is nothing up here to force us to the roof. They began to set up shop.

James and Jason had finally cleared the forest. They were speechless when they first laid eyes on the house. The route taken had been longer than expected. Once James realized their exact location, he dropped down onto the *Blue Ridge Parkway* keeping to the shoulder of the road. They now made up for lost time. The Gate House seemed to overwhelm them but to see the house from the drive made them both set down in awe. "I have never seen anything like this in my life!" Exclaimed Jason as he tried to soak it all in. James said, "I have seen pictures of it but they didn't do it justice. No wonder they wanted to come here, it is remote and a castle that can be defended if need be but at the same time, it will be self-sufficient." The front entrance was too vast to simply walk out into, so they moved to the left circling to check the back and sides to insure the house was vacant. As they set up the spotting scope to watch the west side, Jason kept repeating continually "the place is huge, I mean huge". After ten minutes of this James turned to him saying, "where did you think you were going, to scout camp"? With that, he returned to his legal pad making notes on damage to the building. The duo moved several times in the course of the day recording data on page after page of the legal pad. With about three hours of daylight

left, they entered from the rear to start an interior search and sleep indoors for a change. By the time the downstairs sweep was completed they were ready for a meal and a good night's sleep. James admitted to Jason that he was impressed with the size of the indoors and things like the indoor pool, bowling alley and the staircase were incredible. As they stood looking out the windows on the stair case, Jason commented on the size of the *front yard* "I can't imagine having to mow that". James began, "in time it will be filled with homes of all the people that come here." "What about the big house", Jason asked? "It will become the town hall as we grow to become our own community and government." They settled in for the night talking about plans to complete their part of the mission and return to the group in the next few days.

Across town, the recon team began to move about the streets. In some places, entire city blocks were destroyed by fire. The two men studied the damage agreeing that the fires most likely started because of gas leaks after the war. They spent a full day searching the main business district before feeling safe enough to drive through the city. Both men remained on high alert knowing the sound of the truck would draw attention to anyone within several miles. Pausing at the river David saw a man running toward him waving his arms. When the man realized both men now had rifles aimed at him he stopped in his track shouting "Please Don't Shoot, Please Don't". From two blocks away, Tom's voice boomed, "walk this way slowly and no one will hurt you". The man now showing sign of fear moved toward them in a nervous step. He was still talking as he reaches them." Look, fellows I am not looking for any trouble, you are the first people I have seen in two months, if you don't want me around just say so I'll leave and you will never see me again. OK, OK." He continued to stammer. David spoke "Just calm down nobody going to hurt you." He handed the man a candy bar, telling him they were just looking around for survivors. Tom began talking with him.

"You say you haven't seen anybody in months?"

"That's right, at least two"

"How many did you see before that?"

"Well, could I have something to drink?"

"Sure", David answered squirting the fire extinguisher on a six-pack of *Cokes* and a six-pack of *Bud Light* at the same time. "The CO2 chills them" he said noticing the man quizzical look. The man took the *Bud* and completed the sentence. "Awhile back a small group moved through here driving an Army truck and several civilian trucks. They didn't look military; they didn't look like bad guys either. Actually, they reminded me of the way you guys look."

"What happened, they spent three days in town gathering supplies, then they took the *Blue Ridge Parkway* and left."

"Did you make contact with them?"

"No, at the time I wasn't sure if they were safe."

"Did they have and women and children with them?"

"Yes, but I wasn't sure if they were part of the group or just captives."

"Were you by yourself then?"

"No, I was with a small group of about sixteen."

"Where is this group now?"

"In a small town nearby"

"Why aren't you with them now?"

"I still belong with them I just came in to Asheville for supplies that we didn't take when we left."

"How long have you been gone from here?"

"Look, bud I about tired of all of these questions. If you would like to meet with my people, we can arrange a place to talk. If not then I will go my way and

you can go yours. The two of you are the first new faces I have seen in months. I thought we might talk and exchange information on what is going on and what happened.”

“OK, OK settle down, we are trying to find out ourselves what happened and we have a small group of people we may bring in to town also. We just want to be sure we would be welcome. If not we will go our own way.”

“You mean there are more of you?”

“Yes, we just came ahead to scout things out.”

“Great, I hope one of your group is a doctor we sure need one.”

“Well, we have paramedic and a nurse.”

“How soon can your people get here?”

“It will be several weeks; they are a good ways away. However there are two other guys searching another part of the area and we will meet up with them tomorrow. Why don’t we get inside where we are not exposed to anyone that is looking the area over like we were.”

“Good idea, but don’t worry, you are the first people through here after the convoy.”

They moved inside the *Pisgah Grill* taking a seat at the counter. Tom took a large roasting pan and dumped paper and wood in it. The stranger finally introduced himself as Danny. “My name is David and the chef here is Tom,” he said pointing to the fire now burning in the pan. As the men talked Tom began heating up a can of diced up *Spam* in a small pan, to this he added *Ranch Style* beans. “Might as well have a bite to eat as we talk” David turned back to Danny asking,

“Are there other people around the area?”

“Yes, I know of a group in Black Mountain, they come to the city once in a while but not often. They have a heavy fortified area but we have spoken with them are they

are friendly but don't want any new people to live with them. But we do trade services with each other as needed." He paused to accept a plate of food from Tom. "Also there is a group of about forty near Swannanoa they are alright also; we have traded services with them also. However, there is a group taking shelter in Linville Caverns. They will fire at you if you get close to them. We sent a group to talk with them and they told us in no uncertain terms that they wanted to be left alone. I don't know how they will get by because you can't grow food underground."

"That could be bad news"

"Why?"

"Well when they start to run out of supplies, they most likely turn to raiding other people for survival."

"That could be bad."

"After we get settled do you think we could arrange a meeting with people from each group?"

"Probably so, as long as it was a neutral site."

"We could use one of the buildings here, if that is OK."

"Let me know when you get settled and I will arrange it."

"How do we contact you?"

"Head north on 23 and carry an American flag, we will meet you."

"Anything else you can tell us about the city?"

"No it's OK, you are safe in it but, remember everyone you meet is not a bad guy, so don't shoot anything that moves."

"Deal."

"What news do you have about the war? We haven't heard anything for a long time."

"Everything we know is by word of mouth so I don't know if it is reliable." With that, he briefed them of the little information he had to offer.

CHAPTER 30

James and Jason now stood on the top of the house surveying the area and making notes. A fire had swept through a section of the back gardens and a lower pasture." Thank the Lord it didn't come this way", James said pointing at the burn line. Taking a bag of raisins from his pack Jason began to snack as he drew the site plan on the legal pad." Are we going to check out each of the buildings he questioned?"

"Yep! We need to give a full report when we return. Also, show which areas are burned badly and which is minor damage on your drawing."

"OK, how many days do think it will be before we start back?"

"Probably one more here and then it depends on how much progress the other team has made. Most likely two before we hit the rails again. You, in a hurry to get back?"

"Well I was just thinking the sooner we get back the sooner we can get here and get settled. I am really tired of the traveling and want to get back to normal."

"I know what you mean, it will be nice to get settled but, I'm not sure we will see the normal life for a long time."

The pair stepped from the roof starting the long trek down. As they exited the back along the gardens, Jason pointed saying in a low voice. "Deer dozens of them." Watching in silence the heard moved slowly, grazing on what had once been a perfectly maintained garden. In the margin of the legal pad, Jason had noted one buck, nine does. "That is very encouraging," James said after they watched the game

cross the large expanse and enter the wooded area. "We have noticed more wildlife in the last few days, so that means this area can become self-supporting."

The enormous kitchen appeared to swallow the two of them as they sat down for lunch. Making plans as they ate, the first order of business was to explore the buildings. However, this was not going to be as easy as it appeared from the rooftops. At ground level, the trees and gardens shielded most of them from view. Looking around the front atrium, they found tourist maps of the property. "Great Scott! Look at this", James exclaimed, "they have a winery, according to the map it is two miles away and that doesn't count the three mile driveway. Just how big is this place anyway?" Jason pointed to the map saying; "they advise two days to tour it properly so I would say huge is an understatement."

"I'll say according to the brochure its 8,000 acres and 75 of that are gardens."

"No wonder the deer were here in droves, this must be a real feast for them."

Moving to a caretakers shed they managed to pull-start a *Gator*, driving down access and maintenance roads they circled an area showing burns but at the same time new growth had begun to sprout. Stopping at various sites along the route, they discovered fresh signs of wildlife, but no signs of people. James turned on to the largest road heading to the east. Telling Jason as they drove, "I think we are going to be all right here but still keep an eye open." Jason answered, "I hope things are going well for the team in town."

CHAPTER 31

The two men shook hands with Danny telling him they would be in town until the other pair arrived. "By the way" Tom asked, "aren't you worried walking around here by yourself? We could have been bad guys."

Danny answered, "There were three scopes on you all of the time. If I took, my cap off they would have shot you full of holes". He grinned and said, "We look forward to meeting your group."

“We do also; it will be a few weeks before we get back but keep an eye on the railroad yard. Because we are coming by train.”

“Train?”

“Yep! Train, if you like stick around with your friends and you can meet our other team when they come in.”

“We might do that, let me talk to the others and get back to you.”

Again, they shook hands and Danny stepped away walking down the street to meet with his group that had spent the last hour covering him. It was by his judgment the beginning of a good friendship.

After speaking with the others, they agreed to return to the *Pisgah Grill*. The four men strolled down the street as though it was Saturday and they were out window-shopping. Tom and David could see them coming. This brought a sigh of relief to them, as they now knew they were outnumbered and outgunned if the group decided they were a threat. When Danny left, the pair returned to the grill to prepare for the night. The Biltmore team was not expected to rendezvous at the highrailer until midday tomorrow. Therefore, the grill appeared to be the best location to spend the night. Both men felt better about condition of the town after talking with Danny. By his conversation, they learned the supplies are shared equally with other groups and fighting had not taken place with the exception of the Linville Cavern holdouts. It also told them that supplies needed to be brought on the train wherever they could be found. It was not wise to depend on Asheville to have all of their needs waiting at the end of the line. They congratulated each other on not giving away the planned location of their community. Tom said, “I can’t believe no one thought of it. But then they stayed in their comfort zone and then when you live around something all of the time you just forget about it.”

Danny yelled out as they came on to the block housing the grill. “Hey, it me Danny and my buddies, don’t shoot.”

“Come on in David shouted back its all clear.”

The men came inside stacking their gear on the front tables Tom was behind the counter looking for any food items that might be available for the coming meal. David introduced them to the new men. After a few moments one man stepped forward saying “I think there is a storeroom in the back. I used to eat here when I came to town and I always remember the girl that ran the place had large cans behind the green door.” With that, the two men stepped into a supply room returning with several cans of ravioli, carrots and green peas, plus chill. Looking at the assortment David spoke up “if you mix that together it will probably kill us.” Relax, Tom answered, “there is more in the back this is just some of it. If you want to be of help go and gather some wood or something”. Another man spoke “I’ll get some fuel” as he stepped out the door. By his mannerism, he knew exactly where to go. The remainder of the group began clearing debris and making the place more presentable for their stay.

Luther pulled up in front of the grill driving a *Cadillac* that had seen better days. Not one window save the windshield remained. As he exited the driver’s door, Danny looked at the man wearing the football jersey saying, “guess where he’s been.” Both men grinned at each other. Finally, they shared the humor with Tom and David. Luther it seems had always been poor no matter how hard he tried to get ahead things just went wrong for him. When the war came, everyone was equal in the social registry and Luther now took great enjoyment in this turn of events. Entering the cafe, he carried a large duffle bag filled with money. “Made a withdrawal I see” Danny joked, “Yep! I’m so damn rich I got money to burn.” With that, he dumped bundles on the counter top saying, “son if that ain’t enough, I got more in another account.” Everyone fell apart with laughter. Tom kept things going by adding, “This is going to be the most expensive meal I ever cooked.” The man in the football jersey added “or ate”. The

situation now became hysterical as Luther pulled a large cigar from his shirt pocket, lighting it with a hundred dollar bill.

When it was apparent, what had happened and the money was worthless Luther went to a local bank. He examined the vault, returning from a farm supply store he placed several sticks of dynamite at the door trying to blow it open. It may have worked for *Butch and Sundance* but not for Luther, the result was a lot of noise, some hearing loss and more mess than before. He discovered that bank vaults are wrapped with rebar and concrete. Now more determined than ever Luther came back with blasting agent from a local quarry, the entire truckload, and began pumping it into the area surrounding the vault. Following the directions in the *DuPont Blaster's Handbook*, he took the building down and opened the vault at the same time. The collection of people gathered to watch ran for their lives laughing and swearing as they went.

CHAPTER 32

James and Jason entered the tunnel shortly after sunrise. The pair moved toward the highrailer with a brisk step, but remaining cautious. Reaching into the rear compartment Jason pulled the large water jug out and began pouring a canteen cup full. Gulping it down he filled it again saying to James who was in the process of removing his cup from the case, "this is worth a dollar a cup". James grinned back saying "a dollar isn't worth it used to be". After a few moments they moved to the mouth of the tunnel watching for Tom and David." It is a great place to hide the truck but I don't want to get caught in there if things go bad." James cautioned Jason. "There is no place to run or hide." Taking cover they did not have long to wait until the returning couple came into sight. It was evident by their movement that fatigue had

taken its toll on them as well. Jason shouted "FLASH," back came a tired but boisterous "THUNDER". As they joined up David began to tell of their contact. "We were very careful not to say what part of the area we are settling."

"Good"

"They want to meet with us and talk things over".

"Good"

Sitting down on the tailgate to eat David explained the conversation. James agreed it would be a good idea to talk, hoping to get off on a good foot with our future neighbors. "Let's go to town and meet them," he said climbing into the cab. Tom started the rig and they eased down the track for the remaining miles to the city. As they prepared to pull the wheels the sound of a truck, approaching drew their attention. It was Danny and his group pulling into the yard. They stood watching, as the highrailer became a road truck again. Speaking at last, "so that is what you meant when you said they would be coming by train."

No, it will be a real train.

How far can you travel in that thing?

James now spoke up, "only a short distance, maybe ten or twenty miles. My name is James by the way."

Introductions were made, with the eight men deciding to move from the field of view to a restaurant nearby. Once inside they began to talk about things of local interest. James did most of the questioning and answering about the train and the plans for it. He told the locals that the others were recent additions to the group adding that he had been with the train from almost the beginning. Always careful to avoid saying where the train had originated. He answered questions with a question or by supplying the least information possible. His answers were things such as after awhile you lose track of time without a watch or TV to keep you up to date.

Danny said they had heard radio broadcast from President McKenzie, for the first two weeks of the war but after that, it stopped. James said it was the same for them. He also told the locals without saying where it happened, that they had encountered several raiding parties along the way. Danny told him all of the details about the Linville Caverns group and that once on horseback he and two others discovered several people from Spruce Pine. They appeared to be friendly, telling them their group numbered around twenty-five. By my best guess, he went on to say there are about ten small communities in the western region. We pick up signals on the short wave radio from time to time but most of the people do not give their actual location for protection. James mentioned they had made contact on the short wave and using a scanner picked up some chatter but had not been able to make face-to-face contact with but a few people.

Tom and Luther were now working to prepare a large pot of coffee and something to eat for the group. "From the looks of this place, it was a nice restaurant," Tom declared causally. "Yep, they had good food and a bluegrass band on the weekends". Bringing the coffee to the table the locals asked, if Luther had made the coffee, or if it was good. "Screw all of you" he quipped. Danny pulled a North Carolina map from his pack marking on it the location of people he had made contact with either by radio or in person. "Nothing passed this point" he said pointing to Shelby "and nothing passed here" he said circling Morganton. We have no idea of what has taken place anywhere else. He also added that most of the destruction in this area was in the form of chemical weapons, but the people on the far ranges of contact said that some nuclear and even high explosives were used. Why chemicals in this area James questioned. "Most likely because of the listening post the military has in the mountains not far from Mt. Mitchell. It was installed during the cold war because this is the highest point on the Southeast Coast. They could have wanted it for their own use." He made a dot on the map, "it is somewhere in this area but it was so secret

most people around here didn't even know it existed". James told him that from his contacts most of Dallas, New Orleans, Vicksburg and Atlanta were completely destroyed. However, he could not say for sure about anything else. It was anyone's guess what had happened in the New England area, no signals were heard and the West coast was the same. "Come to think of it" he added "we don't much about any part of the country except what we have seen or met people that have seen it. Information is so valuable now and hard to get". He also told them about hearing a man on the radio proclaiming to be the new president of the U.S." We heard a nut case like that once. He kept saying that he was the Volunteer Fire Chief of a small town so he was in charge. We only heard from him for two or three days so I think he was taken care of by his group". They remained inside for a few more hours talking about things in general. At last, James said it was time for them to head back so the information could be shared with the remainder of the group. The men shook hands telling each that they looked forward to working together trying to rebuild. Danny with his squad took the supply-laden trucks and headed north. While James and the recon team continued to stuff supplies for the return trip in every compartment of the highrailer.

Looking at the sun David asked, "What do you think several more hours of daylight?"

"Probably, I was thinking about this, if we waited till dark to leave no one could tell the direction we take out of town. We don't need lights on the truck because it steers its self and the noise will be hard to detect where it is coming from."

"Of course, Danny and his team said no one was around."

"True, they most likely have kept a constant eye on this place for sometime."

"Then lets hit the road, did you mark the spot on the track where we need to get off to clear the stalled train?"

"Yes, we sprayed the rails with yellow and orange paint."

“I still want to check out the train so we can report the contents to Steve and Mark.”

“I can’t wait to see how they clear this one. It is sitting in a narrow pass and the nearest double track is three miles away.”

“Well, it will be a challenge that’s for sure.”

The squad mounted and they headed for the track to take them back. The atmosphere was relaxed and jovial at points. Jason was now at the controls laughing as he moved the truck down the track. “This like some type of video game no steering just gas and brake, gas and brake.” “Well, “Tom cautioned, “don’t gas our ass in the ditch, because we could never get this beast back on track”. The terrain was at a constant change with track clearance a few feet on each side. At one point as the highrailer entered a tunnel a large doe scrambled down the line in front of them. Jason slowed to a crawl allowing the deer to run far ahead. Watching it, the crew discussed how the sides were so steep the poor animal had no place to go for several yards. It finally came to a spot that permitted its escape from them. David said as the animal bounded from view, “a fast moving train and that deer would have been history.”

“By the way” David asked, “why did you tell Danny and the others that this truck would only travel a short distance?”

“Well I didn’t want them to know how far we had come to get here and I didn’t want them to get the idea of following us. Just a safety precaution.”

“Look ahead”, Jason pointed.” I don’t remember seeing that before.” As the rig slowed to a stop, James stepped out with his M16 at the ready. Tom exited the other side pulling the M60 from its cradle. Moving as far to the edge of the narrow right away as he could James now proceeded. David now moved parallel with his shotgun at his hip. The pair paused for a few moments to study the surroundings. Crossing the track they began to discuss the next move, “all I can see from here is a red tailgate. “

“Not much better from my side, let’s hold the others back. Remember the ambush the others got into. “

“Yep, they lost the truck and almost their lives.”

“We are too close to home to let that happen. If it wasn’t in a curve we could see better.”

Moving back across the track the two men inched their way forward. Only the red tailgate of a truck along with logs and rocks were visible. However, one thing was certain the track was blocked. At ten yards away James shouted, “Hello is anybody there, is anybody there.” No reply came. Moving closer he shouted again, at last, he could now see the overall picture. By appearance, a red truck was caught in a landslide now blocking the track. Waving for the highrailer to come forward the men now scaled the mound to study the serious of the slide. The left portion of the track opened to a steep drop but the right side in which the slide came from had a fifty-foot wall of almost a vertical angle. Standing on the mound of debris pieces of asphalt poked through appearing as black stalagmites intermixed with tree trunks, rocks and tons of dirt.

“Shit, shit, and shit again “yelled David looking down from the top.

“You said it “echoed James. “Well we better make a plan.”

As the highrailer eased to a stop, the group began to brainstorm on any possible solution. It was suggested that Jason being the youngest and in the best shape, try to climb the embankment to see if he could locate a road sign. This will help us pinpoint our location on the road map. I am most worried about the damage to the track.

James helped Jason get into the harness, briefing him on how to set the pitons and reminding him constantly to go slowly. "Don't forget I will be on the safety line for you at all times. When you get to the top, be very careful and don't let the bank cave in with you. Also, look for road signs with highway numbers or distance to a place that we can find on a map. But most of all be careful. “When Jason started up the face

Tom and David began backing the rig down the track looking for a place to turn it around.” I can’t remember the last crossing,” David said as they moved backward as fast as the truck would allow. “The bad thing” Tom answered is” when we turn around, we have to back down the track again just to get to our starting point. But thank God we have this boom and tools on board to help clear the heavy stuff.” David was watching in the mirror as he spoke,” what surprised me was the red truck; I didn’t even know there was a road up there.”

“I don’t think anyone knew it. This area is so steep and rugged, I am willing to bet the road isn’t much wider than this railroad gap. “

“You’re right about that. Did you notice when we got out that this track is setting on solid rock with just a small amount of dirt. “

“Yeah, that must have been fun to build.”

“Here it comes.”

After several miles, the truck turned around beginning its backward return.

As they backed into position, James appeared on top of the pile. They shouted up to him “anything from Jason.” “Not yet, but it could take a little time for him to locate a sign of any type.” He worked down to the track telling them upon arrival, “this looks bad but I think we might be able to clear it. “The trio began unloading shovels and axes from the compartments. Carefully working they pushed large rocks along with broken sections of trees down the embankment. The rubble gave off a resounding boom as it plummeted to a final resting place some sixty feet down the side of the track ledge. As the boom came into action even larger sections of timber came clear, released on the edge and pushed over with a gentle nudge from the boom. With progress on the front side of the pile, more remains of the red truck became visible. While the tailgate showed little damage the front portion of the truck was crushed to half of its original height.” Can you tell if anyone was in there “Tom questioned, “no this part is too far gone, but it is safe to say someone was driving.”

Moving the boom to a location, David attached the cable to drag the truck to the edge of the cliff when the rope Jason had climbed began to move. The men headed toward it as Jason started his decent. He came down with greater ease, joining them in a few moments.” How about some water”, he asked when reaching the ground. Tom traded a bottle for his rifle as Jason downed half of it in one swallow.” I only took one bottle with me and that wasn’t enough.” Sitting on a large rock in the wreckage, he filled them in on his discovery. “Two miles down the road is a sign reading Cope Creek Rd. and just beyond that is one reading Sylva 15 miles. This is a two lane country road with a creek running beside it.” James dashed to the truck pulling the road atlas from the seat. He now had it open attempting to match the railroad map to the atlas based on the information provided. Pulling the compass from his pocket, he took a few readings as the others watched. Now matching the compass to the atlas he placed the railroad map next to it, saying, “This is where we are. “

Making camp it was apparent tomorrow would bring hard work to clear the track before they could inspect it. David began cooking as tents popped upon the small ledge, “Don’t anybody sleep walk tonight” he joked. During the meal, Tom commented that the firelight on this ledge in all likelihood could be seen for miles. Like a lighthouse in a sea of darkness. James agreed adding that artificial light was now almost a thing of the past. James spoke up saying “for the most part we have returned to the 1800’s. In other way we are totally dependent on modern technology”. They sat talking for a few hours with the topic returning to the difficulties of starting a new community and getting things back on track. ”I just don’t know how it is going to all come together “Tom said. “Things we took for granite are now valuable items and are going to be even rarer in the future, unless we can figure out how to make them.”

“Like what”

“Soap, deodorant, batteries and a lot of food items.”

“Come to think of it the menu is a little naked lately.”

“How about in the future, you can’t raise pasta and think of the foods shipped in. like coffee and bananas, tea and it just goes on. “

“Well we do have a shortage now and I can only guess what five years from now will be like. Maybe things will have returned to a somewhat normal state by then.”

As the sun, rose sounds filled the air around them. The most noticeable was the sound of running water. During the night, trash had clogged a culvert pipe crossing under the road. This had caused water to back up flooding the area and now running down the avalanche pile in a small stream surfacing in areas and disappearing back into the debris, at last flowing over the edge as a small waterfall. “This could be bad,” James, said drinking a morning cup of coffee as the group studied the new problem facing them. The team planned to move the largest items on top first, hoping to roll them over the edge using gravity to its’ full advantage. Two hours and little shoveling later, large boulders rolled down the incline taking brush and other smaller articles in the wake. As they paused to study, the next move Tom mentioned the water had moved almost completely under the pile and the waterfall had picked up speed. They now went to hook the cable to a large tree. David motioned for James to pull tight on the cable. As he did, the big truck gave a steady diesel roar but nothing moved. The two men asked for the cable to be slacked off in order to reposition it. They pulled it forward in slow methodical steps, at the center point David prepared to thread it through again. At that moment, the tree and several large rocks broke loose causing the entire face to slide in one large wave. The release of tension on the cable threw James from the truck, as he hit the ground he felt his left arm break. On top of the pile, the two men washed away before they had a chance to yell. Only Jason was spared injury or death, he had gone to the front of the highrailer to bring back bottles of water. Now rushing to James, he could see pain on his face. Grabbing James by his good arm and pulling him to his feet the pair ran down the track a hundred feet. “Oh! MY GOD!” He yelled repeatedly dropping James on the bank, he began to sprint

back. James yelled at Jason to stop and wait until things settled down. Jason turned facing him saying "what about Tom and David!" "They are gone; there is nothing you can do. Get over here before something else comes loose."

The pair waited until the rumbling had ceased, with only the sound of running water coming from the area. Jason helped James to his feet and the duo walked to the highrailer. Jason pulled the first aid box from the compartment. "We better get that arm taken care of, sit down and I will look for some splints. James took a seat opening the box with his good hand he fished out a bottle of *Tylenol 3* with codeine," this will help with the pain but not knock me out," he told Jason returning with several branches for splints. The process took nearly half an hour but the arm now taken care of and ridding comfortably in a sling. Not bothering to break camp, they tossed necessary items into the truck. Jason moved as close to the slide area as he could, looking over the edge he reported that he could not see either of the two men. "I had doubts that you could" James replied. With that, Jason pulled the highrailer in gear taking it down the track.

CHAPTER 33

Back at Simpsonville Steve and Kathy strolled up the street talking as the sun began to set. She pointed at Blanca as she and Wes walked across the street heading toward the caboose. She carried a yellow shopping bag from *Lisa's Lingerie*. Earlier in the day, Steve had spotted Blanca with a box of CD's, candles and wine heading into the car with a definite smile on her face. "Looks like Wes is going to get a little caboose in the caboose" he said to Kathy. "I'll bet they are not the only ones tonight," she answered. They continued to walk past the gazebo. She pulled his arm

steering him inside. On the floor was a cooler, CD player, along with several candles. "Blanca and I went shopping together today," Kathy said with a devilish giggle. "Well, Well, Well" Steve said as he placed his CAR-15 against the wall.

Around the town, people were relaxing in all types of ways. Mike had taken a DVD player and projector arraigning a small movie theater in one of stores downtown. The store had the entire front demolished giving it the appearance of an indoor/outdoor movie. Other couples had found spots to steal away for some private time and the schoolhouse was a buzz of activity. Things still went in the security mode but the number of people needed reduced. There was no longer a need for an outer ring. The buildings offered protection if things went bad during a fight.

As morning brought the first full day in town, last minute details worked out crews assembled at the library to begin the task of clearing it out. Alan with several others brought lumber, nails, radial saws and nail guns from a nearby home improvement store. They constructed packing crates lined with plastic to handle the books. The front of the building torn away, allowing the crates to be moved about with the aid of forklifts. Packing crews stacked books and the lids were nailed shut. Then loaded on trucks they went to the rail yard where the loading crew under Kathy and Tami's guidance filled the cars and recorded the data. The train now grew larger by the hour and the pair worked at a constant pace to keep track of the cargo loading and car numbers. The scenario was being played out at the auto parts and clothing store. The three teams packing plus drivers, and the yard crew made up the bulk of the work force. Other duties underway were preparing the midday meal, lookouts and keeping the supplies for day to day operations. This flurry would continue until four o'clock when weary workers would stop for the day, showering and resting before the evening meal.

At the end of the day the mood was almost celebratory, although tired, they felt they were now preparing for a new life, not just surviving. A pick-up softball game

was underway in the park. Jeff and Ryan had taken a shopping cart filled with golf balls and clubs; they were hitting them from the greenbelt near the caboose down Council St., Ryan joked with his dad that even though he was not driving them as far, he was breaking less windows. Bikes now roamed the streets as packs of young and old alike rode without fear of being hit by cars. Steve and Kathy were now playing a fast pace game of spades against Wes and Blanca while watching the horseshoe tournament move into the semifinal round. "It's good to see everyone relax a little," Blanca said as she swept the cards from the table. "Yes it is" Steve answered taking another sandwich from a box sitting nearby, "another thing", he added "having bread is a bonus, you don't think about what goes into it until you can't have it". They played for another hour until Steve had to relive Troy in the church tower. "Save me some supper", he said shouldering his rifle."

Simpsonville now resembled a ghost town; crews had methodically stripped each store of the contents. Packing and labeling each box transport drivers now had the routine down to a science. Pulling into the rail yard, they yelled out the window to Kathy what they had and she in turn sent them to one of the three loading platforms for unloading. The train crews used walkie-talkies telling her the car numbers for the cargo. This project was a larger scale than any before because they had more time to work and they knew it was not just a resupply stop.

After a hard day's work, the people had found ways to bring a festive mood to help with the uncertainty of things. Softball games, horseshoe matches and other outside games were now common. A small bar and grill at the center of Lancaster St. held dart and pool tournaments. Jeff had even found a few golfers to challenge him in a long ball-driving contest and like in the movie *Tin Cup* bouncing on the roadway counted. Most of the people attended church services offered by Sister Carol or by Jeff. It was the coming together of the people in a less stressful time than it had been

on the road. However, in the back of everyone's mind was still the big move to the final destination plus the pending winter.

Steve and Wes sat in the gazebo talking as the evening sun began slipping away behind bright pink and fuchsia clouds." I am starting to worry about the Asheville team" Wes was saying as he looked up to see Kathy, Blanca along with Mark and Marci walking their way.

"Me too, I expected them back a few days ago."

"What do you think we should do?"

"If they aren't back by Sunday we might want to call a meeting and see if the group wants to send out a team to look for them."

By now, the others arrived so the two changed the topic to try to avoid worrying everyone. This did not work because upon arrival Marci spoke up saying, "we were talking and the time the advance team has been gone seems too long. What do you guys think?"

"We were just having the same conversation a few moments ago."

They continued to talk about things concerning the outlook and plans for the future when their conversation was interrupted by the sound of a band playing. Looking at each other Mark said, "It isn't a radio because I can hear some bad notes mixed in with good ones." Gathering along the rail, they could see a small assemblage marching down the street toward them. As they moved onward people collected in behind. It was at this point James and Troy came forward from the side saying in a joking manner "I'm sorry but you kids will have to vacate the bandstand it's time for the concert under the stars." The group in gazebo now smiled replying gladly, as they filed out. Turning on several low voltage lights that Troy and Mike had rigged during the daylight, the band could now read their music as the audience sat under the clear night sky. The musical group numbered fifteen, with some of them claiming that they had not picked up an instrument in ten or more years. Leading the gang was Carl,

when they were all seated; he faced the gathering, in a loud voice he announced that the concert would begin in earnest in thirty minutes. "This will give you time to collect chairs and refreshment or get out of hearing range." Laughter rippled as people scattered to find the necessities for what was surely going to be an entertaining evening. With the flurry of activity underway Steve approached Carl saying "this is a great idea". "Well," he replied, "we found the instruments at the school and decided to give it a try. I'm sure it will be entertaining but we only know about six songs. Hopefully other people with musical talent will come forward and play guitar or something."

"No matter how it turns out it will be an evening to remember."

"That's for sure"

People began to trickle back forming a semicircle around the bandstand. Several brought banjos, guitars and fiddles. Smiling to himself Steve thought this is exactly what we need. As the night wore on music from bluegrass, waltzes were played to the dancing and enjoyment of all. The event carried on until the early morning hours.

Even in the somewhat relaxed atmosphere it was apparent to Steve that the people wanted to know what was going on in the world, and when the Asheville team would return. In conversations with people they often asked what the timeline was or wasn't the team due back yet. The planned meeting for Sunday was to inform and prepare the group. Several people had been assigned the task of making contingency plans. One group had assembled two different plans to make the trip to Asheville, with another group looking for a different location to move the group in case the teams brought back bad news. As these plans began to take shape, three people had approached Steve on the purpose of scouting some of the smaller communities within a few miles of Simpsonville. This sent red flags up as the people were getting restless and wanted something concrete in their life. If the team did not return soon the group could begin to splinter off to the area surrounding the town. At this point, church and the activities in the evening were the glue holding things together.

CHAPTER 34

Jason had driven the rig before but now he bore the responsibility not only of the operation of it but to seeing to the day-to-day activities. They had to backtrack arriving at the location where Tom and David had turned the truck around a day earlier. This time however they had to leave the railroad and began a journey around the slide being ever mindful not to find them on the Cope Creek Rd. because of the washout. As they moved from the track onto the paved road, James helped him plot a course by writing directions on a legal pad. "Go down to this road" he stated "it will take us by *Scotts Grove Baptist Church*, from there take Old 23, from that point we can take this signal maintenance dirt road back to the track" he said pointing to the railroad map. "It is a pain in the ass to match the road map to the railroad map but it is the only way we can bypass the trouble spots. We need to keep away from any places where bad guys might be. If we get into a shoot out I can only handle a pistol." He now looked at a young man that was eleven days away from his eighteenth birthday. Thinking to himself my life and the lives of all the others could hang in the balance of how well he performs in the next day or two. Jason handled the truck well on the narrow mountain roads with James providing encouragement along the way. After turning onto Old 23 Jason pulled over saying, he needed to get out for a moment. Placing a milk crate filled with several pistols and spare magazines between them on his return he also handed James two Remington 1100 shotguns with the barrels cut down. Next, he placed three boxes of 00 Buck next to the crate. As he climbed behind the wheel he said to James, "I seen Steve do a similar setup for the group that left in the RV awhile back. Now all you have to do is drop the empty gun and pickup a full one."

James looked at the arrangement saying aloud "great idea." Jason now started through the gears as the big truck built speed.

The narrow signal road was not marked with a road sign forcing the two men to drive up and down several times before the overgrown road gave way allowing them to return to the track. Back on the rails, the pair relaxed knowing the switches were lined for their return. As they moved along at thirty miles an hour Jason began to talk about what had happened. "The two of them survived a war only to be killed like that, it doesn't seem fair." James reminded him of the others that were killed along the way by bad guys. "All of these things seem pointless when so many others have died in a war that nobody even knows who won or if we are still at war." They talked and the miles passed by. In the distance, James noticed the large sheet Tom had tied in the tree marking the cutoff point to return to the farm. "How do you think the livestock is doing" Jason asked as the highrailer slowed to a crawl "Hopefully we left them enough food, the pasture supplied the grass and the windmill kept the water supply up, they should be OK Jason". Now with the pair working to retract the wheels and bring the truck on to the crossing road they began to talk about the time it would take to return to Simpsonville. Jason asked, "If we drive slowly do you think we can move at night."

"Well, the switches are lined and I can follow the map and if we drive slowly to check for things on the track and if we switch off driving we could try it and see."

"That certainly is a lot of ifs"

"Yes it is, but we have a lot riding on this mission."

"Can you drive with your arm in a sling?"

"I think so, after all I don't have to steer."

"Do you want to try?"

"I think we should."

The rig was now ready to head to the farm and check on the stock. Jason handled the truck well for someone that had never driven anything larger than a pickup until a few months ago. James had to caution him at first about his speed and the truck being top heavy because of the boom. Now he had the feel of it and moved with confidence. They turned at the stop sign heading down the county road in silence. This portion of the trip had been filled with excitement on the outward leg of the trip. Tom had talked about how finding the stock was a good sign and he was hoping Jose and Marshall would teach him to work cattle like in the movies. David had kidded him saying, "It ain't like John Wayne made it look". Tom fired back "tell me about mister insurance man how many cows did you rope from your *State Farm* office", David flipped him off and the two grown men began arm punching each other like schoolboys on a play ground. They had grown up together and they died together. Now the inside of the truck was without sound except for the humming of the diesel. "If memory serves me right" James said breaking the silence "It should be about a mile from here." The trucks slowed as Jason lessened pressure on the pedal. In a moment, the farm came into view.

"Should we drive up like we own the place or should we check it out from a distance?"

"Let's stop on the road and walk to the door. With my arm in a sling we should look less threatening."

"If it goes bad?"

"Then you haul ass back to the truck and get out of here. It is important that the group gets the information about Asheville."

"What about you?"

I will jump in if I can, if not I will make my way to the track and wait for all of you when you make the trip."

They stopped in front of the house leaving the engine running. Both men carried a pistol tucked in the waistband of their jeans. James shouted, "Hello, Hello is anyone here" no reply again he shouted no reply. They entered the house checking the floor as they stepped. Prior to departure James spread a large area of the floor with flour. Hoping on the return it would tell if anyone had walked through or cleaned it up. The flour remained intact. After checking the house, the two men moved to the barn noticing that things were in the same order. The old truck started and they tossed bags of feed and mineral licks in the bed. As they traveled toward the windmill, the horses began to move in their direction. Counting heads James remarked, "I believe they are all here". Crossing the road, they followed the same routine with the cattle. When the chores were completed, Jason asked, "Should we go on or rest here a bit".

'Well you are doing the driving, how do you feel?"

"I'm ready to go."

'Well let's move on, when you get tired let me know. Even though
you don't have to steer I don't want you falling asleep at the wheel."

"It's a deal."

The drive to the track was uneventful and they made miles at a good rate. Stopping for a snack James took over and they pressed on as the sun began to set.

CHAPTER 35

After the meeting in the church, a few of the men approached Steve asking if it would be all right to do a little hunting in the area. We have seen tracks close to the football field so we know that game is available. "I don't see why not he answered, just

be sure and tell the lookouts so they won't think you are bad guys and start shooting at you." Mark walked up as the men were showing Steve the map they planned to hunt in. "remember felleas" he said with a grin "there isn't a limit or a season now, so bring back plenty and we will salt down what we don't eat right away". They all grinned and one of them spoke up saying "you know my license expired I guess I better go by the sporting goods store and get it renewed." They all started to chuckle adding that the combination license was the best way to go. When they moved away, Mark turned to Steve saying, "That was a good call. We can use some fresh meat no doubt and it keeps them busy so they will stop worrying about the team." Steve answered back "I wish we knew something."

The newly appointed groups began working on backup plans. Others explored the far sections of town that had not been of any value for the supply mission. Nevertheless, the people were restless and it was evident in the faces of everyone that spoke with Steve. Telling Kathy one day as they ate dinner he said, "People want three things in life, someone to love, something to look forward to and something to do. Right now they are feeling lost." She answered him saying, "I have noticed it also and we better get something underway soon or I am afraid some people will drift away and not move when it is time to go. Several have taken up residence in apartments and may not want to leave." They continued this discussion with Wes and Blanca when they came by to play cards.

The following morning shots rang out from a distance placing the people on natural alert. It was only when they learned that a hunting party was out looking for game that everyone began to relax, but at the same time they also came back to the reality that bad guys still roamed the area. More shots rang out as Mark, Steve, Jeff and Wes were having morning coffee. "Well Mark said either we will plenty of meat tonight or those guys are lousy shots." Laughing at the remark Steve looked at Mark saying, "I noticed that they didn't ask for your help."

“Or yours either” he shot back.

As they kept the verbal cut and thrust active for a few moments, the sound of a truck coming into the plaza interrupted them. Honking the horn, people gathered to see the bed loaded with deer. "We will eat good tonight," shouted someone. Steve moved Larry aside, "good job, this is what we needed it gives us cause to celebrate and the shots scared a few people back to the reality of the situation." Larry motioned for Steve to follow him. They walked outside of hearing range he began "when we left town following the main road west, we found about six or seven bodies on the side of the road."

“Six or seven?”

“Yeah, they were decomposed and it looked like coyotes had dragged parts of them away. Anyway, I got the feeling by the way they were clumped together that it wasn't natural"

“What do you mean?”

“There wasn't a car or anything nearby and from the equipment scattered about they were wearing backpacks.”

“Do you think it might have been some of the people that painted the message on the street?”

“That would be my best guess. I think we should double the guards.”

“Let's talk about this more when we can get the Ad-Hoc committee assembled. In the mean time you did a good thing not inciting panic over what you found.”

The committee gathered to discuss several things but the topic of the bodies moved to the head of the list.

“We don't know how or when this happened “

“And we don't know if the people involved are.....”

The sound of the siren from the fire truck stopped everything and everyone in their tracks. Grabbing guns, the group scrambled to their designated positions. Ryan and Michelle were in the tower watching as Matt dashed to sound the alarm. He began to yell, "We can see them, they are coming, we can see them, they are coming." The assemblage relaxed and cheered at the same time. Leaving their positions and running toward Matt questions were fired at him in rapid succession. "How far away, when will they be here, are you sure it is them?" catching his breath he responded, "We can see the truck about five miles away, it is moving among the trees along the track so we can't see it all of the time. But it is our truck." Steve grabbed Mark telling him "let's get down there now and find out if it is bad news so we can prepare to break it to everyone." Mark looked around saying "I think everybody is going to be there at the time of arrival. Good or bad we are going to find out together."

When the highrailer moved into the yard it was surrounded the cheers quickly turned to somber moans as the two surviving men stepped from the cab. Wes and Shirley took hold of them asking everyone to give them room." Let us take care of them first we can ask questions later" Shirley announced in an authoritative voice. People moved aside murmuring, as the men were whisk into a van. Looking at each other Steve and Mark said, "this could be really bad". The walk back to town took much longer than the joyful run a few moments earlier. A doctor's office now served as the medical facility.

The crowd began to dissolve into individual activities for the evening. A large portion headed to the makeshift theater for tonight's western double feature. Others found a spot in the common area to look at the stars. With the lunchroom down to the cleaning crew, the Ad-Hoc committee along with a few other concerned people met to discuss the plans for travel based on the information just received. Steve pouring a glass of tea asked James "what was the size of the slide when you found it."

"About sixty feet wide and forty feet tall but it was full of boulders, trees and the red pickup truck. It appeared stable for us to work on until the water began to run down the side of the mountain. I think this started to undermine the dirt causing the large things to break loose."

"Could you tell if the rails were damaged? "

"No there was still too much dirt on top."

Jason now spoke, "when I scaled to the roadway the section that had fallen was about three times the size of a car. But a lot of the dirt and stuff around the hole looked like it was going to fall"

"And that was before the water started flowing," Steve added, "It could be much worse by now."

"Don't forget about the stalled train two miles down the track from the slide," James interjected.

"Did you get a look at the size and cargo?"

"No it was in slot cut between two large rock faces; with the narrow space for us to work in we thought it would be best to wait to you guys decided what to do about it. It is three miles back to the double track section."

Spreading the map out the two men pointed to the major roadblock in the route to Asheville. "Where is the nearest detour?" Steve said to himself taking a large gulp of tea.

Stepping beside him Mark pointed to the signal map. "We need to find the map covering the area west of this point as he moved his finger along the western boundary. It most likely is in the tower and we didn't pick it up because we planned this route." Two of the bystanders volunteered to go to the tower and bring back everything they could find. With a nod from Steve, they left instantly. Tami now brought a pan of sweet rolls along with a gallon of hot coffee and a fresh gallon of tea, as she pushed the cart to a stop near the end of the table two large buckets of ice. Thinking

aloud Steve said, "Isn't it funny that we take things like ice for granite, but now I am glad to see it because we have been without for weeks." Jeff nodded, "I was telling Tami last night how much I miss the local TV and radio stations." The snack brought a short break in the meeting. When it returned most of the bystanders had left leaving only the committee. Steve began

"I didn't want to say this in front of the others but I think we are going to need an alternate route between the stalled train and the slide it could cause us to back up a long ways. This means we are going to need to send another scout team out."

"You're right "Mark added

"Well considering how close we are to success we need to be very selective about who goes this time'.

Kathy looked Steve straight in the eye saying in a definite tone, "it isn't going to be you".

"No, no it's not. I don't know how to word this correctly but we have some people with us we can't afford to lose. We need our two farmers, our medical team, our electrician see what I mean. But at the same time everyone is important to me also."

Wes now interjected "I know what you mean you don't want to see anyone lost but on a dangerous mission like this, we need someone that won't impact the future of the development."

"Now who do we ask to go?"

Kathy excused herself saying, "I think I have the answer" As she left the others began talking about how long this trip would take. Mark suggested the train stay only one day behind that way he added, "if we have to back up we will know it but at the same time we are making progress." "I agree with Mark," Jeff added. "Me too" Wes said. He followed up, "with if we don't get moving soon some of them are going to stay here". "That is my biggest worry right now," Steve said as he watched Kathy sprint

back into the room with notebook in hand. "Alright now" she said taking her place at the table. "We have two farmers, two mechanics, one warehouse worker, four factory workers, one chemistry teacher,..." she continued until the list was covered. Looking up from the book, she said, "I think we should take a sheet of paper and eliminate the specialty talent." Pulling a pad from her now famous tote bag, she began to say, "I don't want to sound harsh but one of the original party only works when we force him. The only time he has been out of the train is when we had to cross the *Mississippi River* and then he didn't volunteer." Everyone smiled and finally Jeff broke the silence "yep and he could be the one to represent us so no one will feel like we are passing the buck. Kathy added, "We have one carpenter and another contractor." "Fine" Steve said, "Pencil him in," two of the factory workers joined the list along with a truck driver.

The four men were gathered and the committee spoke with them telling them what was needed but not why they were chosen. None of the new team balked at the job asking only when should they leave. Mark's plan to stay a day behind was adopted so it decided that they would leave right after breakfast tomorrow. In addition, they would record the time they passed, on the back of whistle boards or yard signs. Radio traffic would be spotty at best; the power of the equipment without the aid of repeaters severely limited the range. The concern of who was scanning the channels was now more than ever before, with the knowledge of groups in the Asheville area it was accepted that there were groups along the routes. It was now known that some of these were friendly and some not.

Morning brought Bill the truck driver checking out the rig, commenting on how it would be strange to drive but not steer. The crew met with Jason and James exchanging information on what to expect and how things operated on the truck. James told Bill that Jason had driven almost the complete trip on the return and that he had navigated from the rail maps as well as the atlas. "The most important thing is not to get lost, all tracks look alike and if you find yourself on the wrong track you

could drive all the way to a town before you realize it. The mile markers are like the road signs along the way, be sure and mark the start and end of all double tracks." Alan now moved to the cab tossing his small cooler in the front seat, "I guess it's time," he said and the others followed suit. Each of the four had met and discussed what they wanted to do as a primary team member and secondary. With Bill's knowledge of trucks he wanted to drive as much as possible Alan planned to do the map reading and recording, Ronnie along with Mel the youngest of the crew lining switches and painting the rails for the train to follow. All of them carried the usual firepower needed to work their way out of a tight spot. The maps taken from the office gave the best route by Cleveland, TN., with the track turning in an eastern direction at Athens. Plans made to stop the train at Bryson City until the final portion of the trip could be confirmed, from there Maggie Valley to Canton and into Asheville. "This is going to be some rough country," Steve told them "take your time we don't want to lose anyone else". Shaking hands with them, they made a final check, as they pulled the loaded highrailer out; other crews were prepping for the next day's journey. Fuel and sand poured in to the locomotives while Kathy and Tami were showing Jeff and Mark the list of cars and contents. As the pair studied the loading, they motioned Steve over to the table. "What do you think?" Mark asked pointing to the list of cars and contents. "Wow that is going to be one hell of a train." Mark said, "We don't have a scale to get the tonnage but it is going to be the heaviest and longest cut of cars I have ever hooked too". The two men studied the list from top to bottom. Construction and farming equipment plus the Bradley fighting vehicles made up two dozen flatcars alone. Next came the gondolas loaded propane cylinders and the tank cars of diesel fuel and natural gas. Now boxcar after boxcar of food, clothing and all of the things needed to support life, finally the passenger cars. "What do you think "Steve Asked?

"Well it will take at least five or six engines with the grades coming up"

"Yes it will, the slack will be murder running in and out on us."

"Yep, top speed of about ten miles per hour"

"That's what I'm guessing."

"Do you want to cut some tonnage and make two trips?"

"Not if we can help it, who knows what it will be like on the road, this might be our only shot at it. When we build it lets put the equipment on the rear so if we need to set something out we can just break it off and keep moving."

"Good idea."

As they raised their heads, they realized a small group had formed around them. "So what is the verdict?" Jeff asked. "Well it's going to be slow when we leave here" Steve answered "after all we are carrying a whole town with us" he grinned. "I want you right beside Mark all of the way spotting for him and I will be on the other side doing the same. I think we should meet with the group and inform them on how this last leg is going to be made."

With lunch completed, Steve and Mark turned on the projector and map from the night before. Steve began by showing the route planned and that the recon team would be stopping at these locations for the night if things went as planned. Next Mark described the size of the train now and the terrain that lay ahead. "It is going to be slow moving the last thing I want is for us to get into a steep grade and lose our brakes because then it's all over for us. I don't mean to scare any of you I just want everyone to understand why we are going so slowly."

The next order of business was to have Robert get his crew ready for the gun car two extra people to help with any last minute glitches. The usual task of feeding and maintaining everyday life, planning for the night stops assigned to the usual committees. The last thing to plan was with the highrailer a day ahead how do we scout a mile ahead. "This goes back to the time the first unit was destroyed", Steve said. "I guess we could use a four wheel drive pick up until we can find another

highrailer.” The meeting now adjourned with each group finalizing plans for tomorrows pull out.

As afternoon came, the train was in the final stages of assembly, now on the mainline it stretched around the bend out of sight from the passenger cars. Making one last check of the MU cables the cab crew relaxed, Mark suggested they run up the air and get the brake test over. “Well the walk to the rear will do me good,” Steve said as he went to check the EOT.

“I’ll go with you,” Ryan said shouldering his rifle. The pair set off checking the hoses, doors and tie downs as they talked. “I think in a week we should be unloading and settling in” his uncle told him. “ Well”, Ryan answered, “when do you think we will know if it is going to work out?”

“I don’t know the first winter is going to be hard. If we can make that we should be OK.”

“Do you think we will all live in the big house or will we build homes of our own?”

“I’m sure you can build a house of your own if you want. What’s on your mind?”

“I think Sara and I might get married, at least we seem to be going in that direction.”

“Good for you. Yes, we will build the two of you a home of your own. What do your mom and dad say?”

“Well I haven’t got around to talking to them yet.”

“Need some help with your dad?”

“No they will be alright; I just don’t know how to bring it up.”

“Well just set down with them and say we need to talk. They will take it from there. You are a good son and they will listen to what you have to say, you will be surprised how easy it will be once you get the ball rolling.”

“Thanks Uncle Steve”

“You are welcome, anytime.”

Now at the end of the train they watched the pressure gauge as it was coming up. The flashing light had been covered over with duct tape as a means of not giving away their position. “I don’t think there is another train following us,” Steve said “but this little light shines rather bright in the dark. Well let’s walk up the other side and give it a look.” They started moving to the front checking cars as they talked more about how things had changed. “I think your dad or Sister Carol will be busy with people getting married in the near future. There is no telling what the future holds for the world and us. I just wish we could find out what is going on in the country and the world”. They now stopped at the first locomotive preparing to enter the cab when Wes pulled up with the new truck. Moving toward it the pair now joked with him “could you find a bigger one, I wanted a red one, what’s the mpg, how much did they stick you for, I hope you didn’t pay sticker price”. Wes began to pick up ballast and throw it at them. “Let’s get her loaded and we are all set.”

CHAPTER 36

Jim and Monica stood outside the RV scanning the road ahead, on the inside Dale and Lisa were cooking up an afternoon meal. The four had only been separated from the train about two days when the reality of things began to soak in. they were completely alone and very dependent on each other. Driving proved to be a difficult task with the progress of the trip only thirty miles. Main highways clogged at some points forcing the RV to turn around. The time of morning the missiles hit was still early but the highways were active. At one point, the crew traveled for ten miles without interruption only to find three large trucks and several cars entangled into what

had been a fiery, horrible death for some. The highway now blocked they backtracked for several miles to find an exit that could take them back on course. This became the standard for traveling, move in the right direction then detour and so on. They stopped in a picnic area along the highway, the big bus idling as they plotted the next move on an atlas. Lisa came to the door announcing the food was ready. "Let's eat outside" Jim hollered back "the air is fresh and cool". As Dale came to rest at the concrete table, he noticed how Monica had taken highlighters of different colors marking the map of route taken and areas they knew were closed. "That's a good plan," he said pointing to the map. Monica answered "Thank you, I do the map we use but also an atlas in the evening to be sure we have an accurate record for our friends at the Biltmore."

"Wonder how they are doing" Jim interjected.

"I wonder how far along they are" Dale answered.

Now loaded up Jim drove as Dale read the map. "It still looks to be a long ways to check on that old couple Steve asked us to." Glancing over Dale pointed to show Jim. "Yep, it does look to be a good stretch." The RV was moving at the best rate so far on the open road, Lisa and Monica had taken seats at the table drinking and talking as though they did not have a care in the world. They planned to check on Ray and Hazel and hopefully talk them into returning with them. The group had taken Tiff aside telling her of the plan to check out the country and they promised to visit her grandparents. She wrote them a long letter describing things and thanking them for sending her along. On the last page, she encouraged them to come back and join the train. Sealed in a manila envelope it rode in the dash along with the letter of introduction to the people of Lindsey. The letter included an update on their journey and an invitation to come to the Biltmore if things were not going well.

With over two hundred miles under their belt, the crew chose to pull into a rest area for the evening. The RV moved to the rear of the lot among the large trucks. As time lapsed each of the big rigs idled out of fuel. However, Dale and Jim always

checked each fuel tank for fuel to go in the RV supply, as this took place the girls would break open the trailers to see if any cargo could be of use. On one occasion they found cargo of *Remington Shotguns*, they took several of them and threw the remainder of the load into the creek behind the rest area. The truck also contained cell phones and tires. The next trailer brought a solid load of cotton bales. They checked each truck as though they were opening presents. Food and fuel were the prized items of search. The rest area also provided them an excellent place to hide among the other vehicles. They had become paranoid at times as sounds that otherwise would be considered normal made them jumpy.

CHAPTER 37

The last meal in Simpsonville brought the group full of anticipation mixed with anxiety over the departure. The shuttle delivered the last of the personal equipment and passengers as the *Lead Dogs* began pulling away. Steve watched them from the front deck of the lead engine, turning to Jeff, he said, "I hope this goes well, we are so close and we already know things on the other end are going to be alright". Jeff answered his brother saying, "we have come a long way and did the best we could with a lot of bad things coming at us. We will make this last stretch". As they entered the cab, Mark had begun to pull the slack out gently. Ryan took up a position behind Steve, with the M60 leaning against the wall. The chain of diesels powered up with clouds of black smoke billowing from each. Turning to Jeff he said, "this is a lot different than the few cars we started out with on the level ground in Fort Worth." Jeff grinned replying "that is why they pay you the big bucks". "More like **medium**" Mark

shot back. "We will be a full two miles out of town before the last car leaves the yard." The two men now watched the track and console closely, hoping the air pressure stayed up.

Wes eased the truck to a stop checking a small bridge ahead. Telling Matt as the pair moved forward "that truck is going to beat us to death if we don't find another highrailer soon."

"I agree with that"

"The crew ahead of us will most likely do a good job on the switches but they probably don't know what to look for when it comes to bridges or overpasses."

"Why did they send those men instead of us?"

"I'll explain it to you as we go along, it may take some time."

The structure was sound and they continued on their way. Straddling the rail and bumping on the ties made for a short but nerve-racking crossing. With Larry who had taken Steve's, place offering to drive. He stated as they entered the cab, "you guys know what you're looking for and I don't so the least I can do is drive. But this is not what I expected". "You are doing good by me" Matt said," this is like riding a roller coaster and ATV at the same time. It is really going to get bad when we run out of service road and ride like this for miles." With the bridge now behind them they moved at the speed of fifteen miles per hour to prevent leaving the train behind. "Bluehill ahead" Wes announced reading from the map "should be about two miles."

The spot on the map turned out to be several building showing abandonment from long ago. The town now a mile from the track with a four-lane highway moving through the center of it, prospered to the size of six-thousand. Stopping at the yard limit sign Wes found the markings left by the highrailer crew, this was their first stop and the time showed they were a twenty-six hours ahead. "They were here and are holding a good pace for us," he announced entering the cab. "It is likely they will stretch their lead because of our slow travel time with this truck and not wanting to leave the train too far behind." "That's OK" Matt replied, "If they get to the stopping point ahead of us they can always relax and wait until we catch up." "Yeah!" Larry added, "Take a long siesta or something."

Ahead the highrailer crew was learning more about the railroad business with each passing moment. Bill finally mastered the no hands driving but came close several times to wrecking with excessive speed in several of the turns. "You can't feel the damn road," he shouted as they heard the steel wheels screaming against the steel rails. The most frustrating thing to this point was reading the map. Alan who had

spent time with the other crew felt he had it under control only to find he did not, on several occasions they had to backtrack miles. Mel had spent his life working at a plastics plant, now became frustrated with the others as he tried to break the lock on one the electric switches. "Damn it somebody better get their ass over here and help me with this." Ronnie, who was famous for being the last person in line for anything except eating, moved forward to help. The big hammer came down for the second time sending the lock across the track. He now lifted the switch grunting as it went over. The crew moved on down the track. When they were asked to take the job on the highrailer, they agreed thinking it would be easy work. Only Alan knew the truth, but the way he was asked, did not leave him much room to refuse. Early in the trip, Ronnie began to complain about the food saying that there was not enough and the cooking was lousy. The other three voted to put him in charge so he could fix as much as he wanted, as he wanted it. This did not improve the conditions; he turned out to be one of the worst cooks ever.

The journey continued passing burned sections coupled with pristine woodlands spotting the occasional glimpse of wildlife. In the distance, a mobile home came under scrutiny as a likely stopping point for the night. Setting a hundred yards from the right away, it looked inviting. Pausing down the line Alan exited the cab moving to the right with Mel circling to the left, converging unnoticed. Alan yanked the front door open; the metal box had served as an oven and greenhouse combination. The smell drove both men to their knees; Mel whirled around vomiting his way down the steps and out into the yard. Alan slammed the door only to have it bounce open as he passed Mel in the yard. The two men dashed down the driveway finding refuge under a cluster of oak trees. Catching their breath Mel rinsed his mouth out while gasping to Alan "I have never, never, never smelled anything like that in my life." Looking at him Alan answered, "One thing's for sure we aren't staying there tonight." The pair walked toward the highrailer motioning for it to pick them up. Entering the cab

Ronnie piped up “smelled bad did it?” Mel answered back “just like that shit you cooked for lunch”

‘Well then you can cook”

“Well then you can check out the places”

Looking as though it may come to blows Alan spoke up saying “I think we should all take turns doing everything”

“Yes, daddy we will play nice” Ronnie smarted back. Alan turned from the front seat driving his fist into Ronnie’s face all in one motion. By the time he bounced back, a large barrel .45 was looking him in the face. “Listen to me asshole! There is nothing to prevent us from tossing your ass out and driving away. So get with it or else!” tension remained high in the cab during the search for a nights quarters. After two hours, the team decided to pitch tents in a pasture rather than search farther with light failing.

The *Lead Dogs* also pulled into a wide spot along the track allowing the train to catch up.

“Think it is about time to stop before dark or do you want to push on?”

“Looks good to me,” shouted Mark from the cab. With the decision made, the crews sprung into action, an apple grove providing tonight’s campsite. “We shouldn’t be camping out much longer,” Kathy said tossing the tent from the freight car. “After sleeping in the beds in town you have got soft,” Steve shouted back picking up the gear to go into the *Gator*. The train group worked like a well-oiled machine. The first members unloaded the *Gators*, second came the unloading crew. Kitchen, lights and tents bringing up the last, things fell into a natural rhythm with the camp setup completed in an hour. The *Lead Dogs* now spread maps out with the train crew studying their location, at the same time speculating on the progress of the recon team. “If they average thirty miles an hour.” Wes was saying, “They should be about here.” He pointed to a small valley, as he did this Karen walked up asking about any

news from Alan. Steve told her about the markings on the back of the whistle boards assuring her that things were all right. "They are about twenty-six hours ahead of us. We were just plotting their location when you came up, most likely they are here" he said showing her the dot on the map. She hung around a few more minutes before returning to the kitchen for coffee. "She is worried about him," Mark said. "Big deal" came a voice from behind them. Turning to see Kathy, "Steve and the others have been out there for weeks risking their lives. Let her worry for a change." She sat down a small cooler of drinks and a bag filled with chips and sandwiches. "Just a little snack, I know all of you, you will be at this for hours planning and planning." Pulling up a yard chair, she looked at the maps, "how soon". Steve looked at her answering, "Well we aren't sure, it all depends on the tracks and what they find ahead. But if it goes well four days." others began to filter by looking at the maps and asking the same questions, how soon, how soon.

CHAPTER 38

Settling in for the night about two hours early gave them time to set up a perimeter eat and relax outside before sleeping inside. After two days on the inside, the walls were closing in as Kathy had warned. This night Monica sat at the picnic table near the RV thinking about home and all that was gone. She sobbed quietly as not to disturb the others. Mostly she missed her dog, Boscoe. The journey was going to be a healing process for her. She had never been more than a hundred miles from home in her entire life. Now even with the world in upheaval she could see some of the beauty of it. During the train ride, she sat next to the window absorbing the scenery like a sponge. Now in silence she wanted her dog to share it with her. The

door opened with Jim standing in the dim light from within, he called softly "Baby are you alright?" "Yes" she replied, just getting some air and having a cigarette, I'll be in soon." He closed the door rejoining the others watching *Friends* on DVD, he had been with Monica for several years and he knew right now she needed to be alone. Inside Dale and Lisa opened another bottle of white wine drinking it cowboy style. Shaking his head, he told them "you two are going to feel like shit in the morning." "Most likely" Lisa said "but we might be dead by tomorrow night anyway." Her casual attitude toward life had always made Jim wonder how she and Dale ever got together. However, thinking about it he decided that maybe opposites do attract.

Morning brought breakfast for two and a large hangover for two. Nearby sat a water delivery truck filled with rack after rack of the five-gallon jugs, the group had loaded several of them in the RV. Now Dale stood under them chopping the ends off with a hatchet allowing the cool water to rush over his throbbing head. Lisa sat at his feet catching the stream as it splashed from him. Monica brought breakfast outside followed by Jim with a coffee pot. "Looks like I will be in the driver's seat for awhile". Taking coffee down to the bathers, placing it on the ground and moving away before they got a bath, the pair returned to prepare to get underway. As the last items were secured a pair of wet, miserable looking souls made their way across the lot to start the day. Monica told Dale she would navigate awhile to get some rest. He thanked her falling onto the bed in the rear. Lisa appeared to be in much better shape moving about the inside looking for something to eat. Miles turned into more miles as the highway gave way to them. It was necessary to move around wrecks but nothing that impeded the drive. At one point Jim simply pulled up next to a large truck and refilled the fuel tank without leaving the road. Tell Lisa "I think we may make it to the old couple's house tonight." She answered back "let's don't surprise them at night, if we get close we should stop and get there in the morning." They moved on with the big

bus humming a loud diesel tune. During the next few hours, it became necessary to take several side roads as detours but as a whole, the miles clicked away.

About dark, they entered the town of Bovina as predicted it was too late in the day to visit the old couple. Moving the bus beside the strip shopping center that formed most of the towns stores Dale began a search for any supplies they may need to replenish as the women sat up folding chairs and tables for the evening. Jim decided to take the map a walk the area out to actually find the couple house but not make contact with them. Steve sketched a map showing the location in relationship to the track and noted the road names in the margin. Jim now moved with care as he approached the lights shining from the small farmhouse. Easing back to the RV, he told the group “We are only a mile or so from them “.

Sunrise brought the rustle of four sleepy heads, from the furniture store came Dale with Lisa dragging a blanket around her. Jim and Monica were drinking coffee as Jim pointed out the location on the map in relation to the streets. “We can walk there from here” She answered “that might be a good thing, as opposed to just driving up in a big bus and scaring the hell out of them.” As they spoke, Dale joined them while in the background Lisa washed the sleep from her face. “What time do you want to go?” he questioned pulling up a seat. “It’s morning yet I was thinking about eleven or twelve.” Dale looked at Lisa saying, “She might be ready by then” Lisa paused from washing only long enough to flip him the finger. “I love you to baby” he whispered. After the morning meal, the couples split up and did some *shopping*, as Jim put it. Mostly they made notes of the area, picked up a few new movies and restocked the beer supply.

Around eleven, they began to walk toward Ray and Hazel’s house. When they were within a hundred yard Dale called out “hello in the house, we have greeting from Tiff and the people from the train.” The screen door creaked as Ray moved onto the porch, he waived to them answering back in as strong a voice a man of eighty-two

could muster, "Welcome, welcome." They approached in a livelier step but it was Monica, who nudged Jim saying, "I think Hazel is still in the living room with a shotgun." He looked back saying, "She will relax soon." The four carried backpacks with supplies for the couple and only had pistols on their sides, to relieve any fears the old couple may feel. Now entering the yard Dale reached out his hand saying, "we brought you a few things but I think the things you probably want most are the letter from Tiff and the letter from Steve and the rest of the crew." Ray reached out his weather beaten hand Saying as they shook, "you are a blessing from God, we talked about her last night hoping we made the right choice and that she was alright." Lisa now reached her hand forward saying, "she is just fine and everyone is doing great and making good progress toward getting to the Biltmore House." Hazel now propped the gun against the wall as she stepped onto the porch joining the celebration. Introduction concluded Dale pulled out the letters handing each of them one.

Ray began to read aloud, "Maw-Maw and Paw-Paw; I am doing fine traveling with these people on the train. We have picked up many more from the time I left with them, each time someone joins the group, all of the people make them feel like old friends. We have moved into a very pretty part of the country and I can only wonder what it looked like before all of the war came. Steve and Kathy look after me like I was their daughter, which makes me feel very secure in the fact that I will have every opportunity to live a good life. There are a lot of people my own age here and I have made many friends. But Steve keeps a sharp eye on the boys coming around, a lot like you did. I do love you both and miss you very much. Please consider coming back with these people they are good and you would enjoy living with us. If you don't, remember I will always have the pictures Kathy made at our house and the love you gave me. It was hard for me to leave you, but I think you did the right thing."

Love Forever, Tiff

By the time, he completed the letter their eyes were watering and his hand was shaking to the point where he had to sit down on the steps. Hazel excused herself saying she was going to fix ice tea for everyone, even in the kitchen at the rear of the house sobs made their way to the front. Ray gaining composure told them how the pair had wondered so many times if they had made the right choice and this letter confirmed it. He asked many questions about her as well as the people traveling. When Jim told him about how many people had joined the procession after leaving here, he could not believe it. As Lisa told of the stops along the way, Hazel returned with a jug of tea and a stack of glasses. She questioned Monica as she handed her the tray. "So how long can all of you stay?"

"A few days but we have to keep moving; we promised Steve we would check on a town a little farther down the line."

"By the way how did all of you get here?"

"We have a big bus parked downtown; we didn't want to drive up in it for fear of frightening you"

"That was smart; I just may have taken a shot at something like that." She grinned. "After awhile go and get it so you can park in the driveway for the rest of the time you are here."

The men took Ray's *Gator* to town, bringing back the bus and other supplies Ray tossed in while they looked through the stores. He also took this chance to talk with them outside of Hazel's hearing. "How are thing really he asked and don't hold back anything." The two shared the gun battles they had been through but they also told him things were overall doing great. Jim told Ray that he felt most of the people would not have survived much longer if the train had not been there. They keep things running well and always look out for those who need help. Just like the people, we are going to see in the town down the line. Dale looked at Ray after Jim finished saying "No shit Ray if it wasn't good we would be asking you to let us stay instead of trying to

get you to go with us.” Ray said he felt better but was not sure if they would leave or not.

When the big bus pulled into the road in front of the house, Monica told them to leave it there. She said “What are you going to do block traffic” Ray and Hazel toured the bus saying it was nicer than their house and it was the most beautiful thing they had ever seen. Jim kept trying to get him to drive it around the block but he refused saying his eyesight was not what it used to be and it was more than he could handle. The next two days made for a bonding experience for all involved but it was time for them to move on and a decision must be made if the couple was going to make the trip with them. The deciding factor was when the couple found that other people about their own age were on the train. Ray said he always felt it was wrong for him and Hazel to go because they would be a burden to everyone and as time went by they would not be as welcome as at first. The two gathered up belongings eagerly to hop on board the big RV.

The bus now a little more crowded than before also changed in other respects. A little less partying from Dale and Lisa, not that Jim and Monica were slackers in that department, Jim was a little more cautious in the open spaces when no one was around to keep a lid on things. If we all are wasted, someone will just walk in and shoot us. At twenty-six, he was becoming more responsible than he ever though he would. Moving down the two-lane country road the bus could only reach a speed of fifteen miles per hour. Every few yards Dale would duck behind the wheel as he dodged low hanging branches. Jim would burst into laughter saying, “You ain’t ever going to get used to driving this tall rig are you?” “Just shut up will you” he replied. After a few miles they were able to drop back on the main road but this turned out to be short lived, crossing the median to clear a wreck only to cross back a few miles later. In desperation, the group decided to try another secondary road that looked promising on the map. Turning on to Rt. 73 the bus pulled into a convince store to

allow everyone to stretch their legs. Walking through the store Jim picked up packs of *Slim Jims*, *M & M's*, and other sealed food that had not spoiled. The girls made a stop in the restroom as the guys scavenged for other items needed.

Moving cross-country in some ways had met the expectations of the four but in other locations, the shock caused them to recoil in horror. One stop not likely to be forgotten was the rural house that looked inviting for a stop. As the men pulled the bus with the small trailer in a circle around the drive, Lisa rushed into the house to explore it. What she found caused her to try to scream but the sound would not come, she could only run in place making no progress exiting the door. Monica could see her and knew something was wrong. Rushing to her side the object of her panic was now in view. Sitting on the couch in the living room were the remains of four children, what appeared to be their mother. Each had been shot, with the father sitting in a chair across the room the rifle still clutched in his decomposing hands.

CHAPTER 38

The blue-gray sky opened to a light sprinkle of rain. This mist caused you become soaked before you knew it. Crews pitched gear on board the train in a dreary mood. Glad to see the much-needed rain but depressed to be out in it. The mood for the recon team ran parallel to that of the train group. Alan along with Bill gave the rig a check out as the others tossed equipment into the compartments. Ronnie had not said anything about the punch in the face but it was rolling around in the back of his mind. He would balance the scales; no one had ever talked to him like that, not even his

father. Alan knew to keep a weather eye out for him. Mounting the truck Bill assumed the driver position with Alan riding behind him the back seat, this gave him more room to spread out the maps and Mel tracked the route on the atlas. Ronnie now had to lined the switches to which he complained constantly even when Mel helped. After a few miles, Bill switched places to shut him up. They now approached a steel framed trestle that was exhibiting signs of fire on the far side. "Do you want to drive a cross it or walk it first. " Bill turned to Alan. "We should walk it to be sure," he said opening the door and pulling out his rifle. "Two hundred feet."

"I'd say so"

They moved across at a slow pace feeling exposed to anyone watching from any direction. Ronnie kept the truck parked in the shadows in effort to hide it. Past the midpoint, it became clear the bridge was safe for crossing but the pair wanted to check the surrounding for any tale, tale signs of life. After a few moments, the all clear given bringing the truck to a stop on the far side. Mel spoke when the crew took their seats, "that was a very naked feeling back there out in the open". Alan answered, "Just imagine crossing the *Mississippi River* like that". "No thanks" came the answer in stereo. Looking at the map Alan called "Craven Hollow should be next after that we will be clear to Cleveland." with the signal map between them Alan pointed it out to Mel. The miles rolled along smoothly for the highrailer. The plan to stop short of the town limits and ease into the yard discussed. Alan with Mel to cover him would circle the yard to provide cover as the rig moved to the fueling area. Cleveland according to the atlas was around 40,000 large in population and the group felt it most likely have a fair number of stores because it also provided for the surrounding area. After a study of the area, the team decided to look for an alternated route and bypass the city. Working back to the highrailer Alan pulled the signal map out studying it on the tailgate. Ronnie moved up the hillside to keep an eye open for any patrols. "It looks like we are going to backtrack about five miles to this branch line. From there we can

move around the town joining back to the original track.” Bill backed the truck to the switch and the crew continued to move circling the city. After the two-hour detour through several small crossroads and skeletons of towns from days past they returned to the mainline. The terrain began to rise and fall as mountains gave way to valleys that gave way to mountains. The redeeming feature for driving the on the railroad was the track must maintain a constant grade to keep traction for steel wheels on steel rails.

The train now slowed to five miles per hour as the pickup truck bounced along the track. The region of travel did not allow for a service road, it consisted of a sheer rock face on the left with a drop off fifty feet to the right. “How much longer can this go on” Wes questioned to no one special. Matt answered back “It could be raining like it was this morning”. “Keep quite will you, it may start again” Wes said as he smacked Matt on the back of the head. The mood was much different from that of the highrailer. The truck plodded along straddling the rail hoping the access road would come back. In the back of their mind was can we find another highrailer soon because this is slowing us up greatly and if we have to drive this thing all the way to Asheville it will beat us to pieces. They continued to make light of the current conditions remembering the miles traveled and obstacles already overcome. Throwing a *Snickers* bar over his shoulder Matt caught Wes square on the top of his head. As he tossed it, he said, “one thing for sure we can eat with the train group, so that means no more of your cooking”. This bantering made the miles pass keeping spirit high. The two new *Lead Dogs* Rick and Tommy were not sure what to make of things, they just watched not sure, if the fighting was serious or not. Easing to a stop in front of a whistle board Matt said, “It is a long way between crossings out here, hope we don’t have to make any detours.” Rick jumped from the cab reading the information left by the highrailer crew. Wes checked his watch, announcing to the others, the recon group was now thirty hours ahead. He also added they had a truck better suited for

the trip and they may have slept longer so this time was based on yesterday's travels a lot may have happened in the mean time. Pulling forward Matt gained speed until they bounced along at a blistering speed of ten miles per hour. This would continue for two more miles when the track opened to a downgrade to a valley floor. Rick spoke now for the first time in hours, "this part of the country looks completely untouched like nothing happened in the world." "Yes it does" Wes agreed with him.

Back on the main line with Cleveland in the mirror, the highrailer encountered their first stalled train. Alan noted the mile marker and other information necessary for the train crew to clear the tracks. It was only a mile and a half back to the crossing where they changed to road wheels. Dropping down to the service road, they were clear of it in no time. Mel, who had changed places with Ronnie, was still getting the feel of driving as they approached the yard sign of High Rock Flats. Taking the marker from the dash Alan stepped from the cab followed by Ronnie. At the moment he reached the sign, Karen became a widow. The shot came from halfway up the mountainside, striking him in the center of the chest. It spun his body around dropping him face first in the grass at the base of the sign. Ronnie now turned to run as Mel searched for reverse in the big truck. A second shot hit Ronnie between the shoulder blades causing him to pitch forward as he tried to run. Now more frantic than ever Mel had the big truck lurching backward in an attempt to turn around. The third shot shattered the windshield sending a bullet into the passenger seat, causing Mel to panic more than before. OH! SHIT, OH! SHIT, he yelled as he now jammed the truck in a forward gear turning away from the firing. Bill grabbed one of the AR-15 from the backseat; jamming it out the window firing blindly at the hillside. Neither of the two men could tell the location of the shooter. Nevertheless, they knew whoever it was could hit with deadly accuracy. Bill emptied the magazine, as he was reloading Mel completed the turn. Still within range, the back glass exploded into thousands of bits showering the inside of the truck. Shouting to Mel "go as fast as you can and try to get

something or as much distance between us and them .” the rig now moved across the service road bouncing from side to side tossing equipment out of the bed and compartment doors. The shooting continued as a round hit the bed followed by one piercing the roof, two were heard glancing off the heavy boom. Mel moved the truck down the road for two miles before he felt safe to stop. Rolling to a halt the two men had not spoken from the time of the shooting. Mel sat silently behind the wheel looking ahead blankly. Bill now realized he was trembling to the point he could not load a magazine into the rifle. At last, Bill stepped from the back seat, lighting a cigarette he walked away from the truck sitting on a large rock. Mel moved from the cab walking around the truck looking at the damage shaking his head at each step. After a few moments, he sat on a rock near Bill. The two looked at each other with Bill finally speaking, “can you believe what just happened”.

“No, no I can’t”

“They are both dead and it only took a minute. We would be dead also if you hadn’t got us out of there.”

“I felt like it was taking forever to turn that big truck around”

“You did a good job and believe me who ever was shooting at us was very good.”

“Do you think it was more than one?”

“No, I did a lot of hunting and judging by the rate of fire I would say it was one person with a bolt action and a good scope.”

“What do you think we should do now?”

“I think we should head back toward the train as fast as we can so they don’t follow us into the trap.”

Both men sat for a few moments before walking around the truck to survey the damage. The proximity of several holes made each man realize how close to death they had come. It became more evident when they were locking the wheels to the

rails. As the truck shifted to the track position water began running from the rear compartment Mel opened the door to find several of the water containers hit by a single bullet, had the water not stopped the round it would have gone through the rear cab about where Bill had been firing. The pair decided the switches were lined in the right direction so they would not need to slow for them pressed the speed of the truck to return as quickly as possible. It was several miles before they began speaking of the action they witnessed.

“How do think this is going to be received when we return?”

“Well everyone is going to be shaken, but Karen will really go crazy.”

“The next time we stop I will grab a cooler so we can eat as we go.”

“Most likely it will be in that little crossroads where we refueled from the engine on the siding.”

“I think I can drive awhile if you want me to.”

It would be another hour before they reached the stop. As they prepared to resume the trip, each man still reflected on how a simple decision and location on the truck saved their lives.

CHAPTER 39

The train now followed the truck by only two hundred yards as the *Lead Dogs* pressed onward in the pickup. Checking the last sign, they were now a full thirty-five hours behind the highrailer. However, that was about to change. The train crew decided to keep moving well into the night driving without lights to avoid giving away their position. Sound carries in the darkness but it is often difficult to detect the

direction of it's travel, Based on the information from the map a switching yard lay four miles down the track hopefully they would find some type of vehicle to replace the truck. Groping along with only the light of a partial moon to guide them, they at last entered the yard. It was a small yard with only six tracks and a tower to operate. Staying on the main line the train held fast as the truck crew scouted for any type of highrailer they could use. In the gravel parking lot, they found a signal maintainer's truck, a standard pick up with a utility bed on it. Only two people could ride in the cab. It took nearly an hour to load it and prepare to get under way. Matt and Wes offered to drive the first shift in the now cramped cab, allowing Rick and Larry to return to the train for some rest. Wes told Matt after they were alone "I wanted us to drive the dark leg even though we are tired; they have less experience than us". Matt agreed, "We do have a certain number of miles in these things." "All the way from Texas" Wes grinned.

The train crew had other plans however. James had taken the map pointing out to Steve that the livestock left at the farm was only twenty odd miles away and they could head down this road cutting over to the farm. By his estimate, they could make it round trip in a half day. "I think it will take longer to load the stock than to drive the route." Steve studied the map saying, "it would be ashamed to let the stock die and we certainly could use them. "Let's meet on it." He replied. Announcing to the group that they would be here longer than originally planned, many dismounted the train to explore the town. With the AD-HOC, members present plus Marshall and Jose, James presented the plan. "My only concern is how we will transport them." Jose spoke up offering a plan. "If we can find some tractor trailers, preferably flat trailers we could do a makeshift job on them to convert them into cattle haulers. I have seen it done before."

Mark now spoke up "how long will this take?"

"Five or six hours to make them if we have the stuff

"It would be a shame to lose that much stock"

Wes interjected " Maybe the down time will let the highrailer crew return with news"

Steve called for a vote; it was unanimous to go for the stock. Jose was in charge of transportation and he at once took command asking every welder to meet with him. Larry took a group into town to look for trucks, James requested to tag along saying he had an idea. A short time later James returned with one of the men driving a large wrecker. Stepping down from the cab with his arm still in a sling, he told Steve "I thought we might take it in case of road blocks." The transportation crew was in full swing according to him. "Jose has got them working on some type of frame to fit the trucks."

Evening found the group settling in a local restaurant for dinner. Jose stood on a chair telling all that they would be ready to leave first thing in the morning. This was followed by others giving reports of activities of the day. As this meeting was, taking place the sound of the train horn filled the air in long blast three times. People jumped to their feet recognizing the emergency signal. At the train, the two people on guard duty waived the crowd streaming to the tracks onto the platform. Spotting Steve they called out, "It's the highrailer over here." The gathering now ran toward it sitting beside the locomotive. Mel and Bill were sitting on the running board visibly shaken. Mel seeing Steve began to speak.

"We were stopping to check a yard out when out of nowhere the shooting began. They shot us to pieces before we could even react."

"Where are the other two?"

"They are dead killed with the first two shots."

Everyone gasped, others were arriving and the news brought screams from Karen and Amber. Several of the women took them by the arms guiding them to a seat, trying to comfort them. Realizing a panic could spread Steve quickly moved the

pair inside the tower for full details. Jeff and Wes had already put out extra guards and warning people not to shoot each other. Mel gave the full story with Bill adding comments. Pointing to a map the men reported the condition of the track up to the site of the ambush. Bill told them it appeared to be one man with a scope and good shooting skills. Most likely a sentry like ours, the shots were to far a part to have been from an automatic he added. The group sent them to get some rest and asked them not to tell anyone all of the details because it could send a wave of fear bigger than the one they have now. As they were leaving, Karen entered the room tear streaked face demanding to know about Alan. Bill told her how he was killed and that they fled without retrieving his body. She collapsed into a chair sobbing into her hands. Fear of being followed now circulated the group.

Wes and Shirley gave Karen and Amber something to make them sleep. Others were pacing restless as the night wore on. The guards worried that the men were followed moved up the track to provide advance warning. By morning, things had calmed however, the realization of what could have happened if the entire train had been caught in the shoot out still hung in the air.

CHAPTER 40

James and Jason mounted the wrecker to lead the way. Others staffed the trucks, but they were more heavily armed. The trailers were flat style encased in square tubing, welded to form side rails and gates. Each trailer looked like a giant rolling jail. James wife asked him not to go with his arm in a sling; no one would think less of him she said. "I must go he told her Jason and I are the only people that know the way." Tiff had also begged Jason to stay behind telling him how much he meant to her. However, he also said that he must go to show the way.

The first part of the trip was simple, roads were clear and no one was insight. Nearing a small bridge the wrecker team could see a car crossing the road on the opposite side about fifty feet from the entrance. Jason had been doing all of the driving due to James arm. Looking to him for advice he asked, "What should we do?" James poked an MP5 out the window and said, "Hit it in the quarter panel solid and as fast as you can, but keep the truck on the road." Jason followed directions sending the little Toyota bouncing into the ditch. The remaining trucks followed in a tight pack expecting trouble but none came. At last, James recognized the road they had used to bypass the farm. "Only a mile more" he announced. Jason began slowing the big wrecker down, watching for the house. They stopped a hundred yards away watching for signs of life. After a half hour, the convoy moved to the road in front. Jose now rushed forward from the first cattle truck to survey the area. James and Jason now dismounted told him of the location of the stock. Swinging into action Jose opened the gate to the loading pen motioning the first truck to the ramp. Turning to his son, he told him "we will take the horses from the far pasture to round up the cattle". Moving across the road in the direction of the house, he was joined by the others. Asking how many could work stock he only three hands and those three admitted it was when they were younger and with limited experience. He asked the others if they would help his father with the gates and trailers. They agreed leaving him with his *green cowboys*.

On the back of the wrecker Jose had, stacked extra saddles and tack in case it was needed. Carlos now asked if they would get the gear while he rounded up the horses. The first horse caught was a black and white mare standing at the windmill. She offered no resistance as he slipped the lariat over her. Leading her back to the gate, Carl placed the saddle on her back as Carlos fitted the bridle. Gently he mounted her and she responded as if they were old friends. Circling the pasture, he now herded the remaining stock to the pen at the barn. Handing his horse reins to

Carl, Carlos asked if he would give this mare to his father to begin working the cattle. With each horse prepared, the men one by one moved across the road to assist with the roundup. The remaining animals were loaded into the trailer. Two of the men followed Carlos's instructions clearing out the barn of every item he pointed too; we will need it all he told them.

Joining his father in addition to the green cowboys the crew moved the stock to a holding chute as trailer after trailer filled and pulled into line on the road. About midway through the operation, everyone needed a rest. Larry pulled coolers from the truck as Carl lit a small fire to heat the much needed lunch. The talk rambled from topic to topic but mostly they questioned James and Jason about Biltmore because they were the only ones of the train crew that had seen it. James told them all he could about finally saying, "I could not have designed a better place if I could have had ten years to work on it." As the questions, continued Carlos and Jose checked each trailer ensuring that plenty of water was on hand and that none of the stock was in danger. Telling his son how proud of him he was for all of his work, he also reminded him that hard days were ahead. Carlos smiled at his father saying, "We can do it, I know we can." The pair strolled back to the gathering with their arms around each other's shoulders.

Back at the train, maps spread out as the search for a new route started. Pointing at the east line Steve said, "The slide took this track out plus two good men. This line is blocked by hostile action that cost us two more men." Mark now pointed saying "that leaves us these two choices, which one do you want to try?"

"This looks to be the shortest"

"What about the highrailer?"

"It has a few holes in it but, it is still good to use."

"Do you think we should send it out further down the line like before?"

"Yes, as bad as that was, the whole group could have been caught in that shooting. A good sentry would let the train pass by then close the door behind us by trapping us with their gunfire. As it was they didn't know what was following."

"It's going to be hard to get anyone to volunteer for that job now."

"Then we will draft them like last time."

In the distance, the sounds of the air horns on the wrecker sounded. The signaling approach of the stock trucks sent everyone to the yard. As the first truck pulled in the crowd collected to see if the trip was as successful as hoped. Viewing the wrecker the group found it pulling a farm trailer loaded with tack and supplies. Following in the convoy truck after truck moved in fully loaded with stock. Marshall turned to Steve saying, "It was a gamble but it paid off in spades, this in addition to our current stock will give us the ability to have a ranch up and running in no time." Nodding to him Steve answered, "That's great one less thing we have to worry about." Jose stepped from the first semi, greeting his family and Marshall.

During the twelve-hour absence, the train crew made the necessary preparations to ship the stock, repaired the highrailer and plotted the route. The group now wanted to get moving the instant things were ready. Questions directed to the travelers indicated that no one spotted them during their trip. This news brought a sigh of relief to the planners. The new route would take them into the region just visited. As others helped with tending the stock, the weary *cowboys* ate a hardy meal as James met with the committee to provide details and much needed reconnoiter information. They would leave the next day after the stock recovered from the trip.

CHAPTER 41

The bus now moved gently down a small country road leading into town. Jim weaved in and out of fallen trees and vehicles they selected this road because the map was showing it as a bypass for the major highway but still allowing them to check the perimeter of the town for supplies. Approaching a large farm truck Jim now eased the RV to the opposite lane. Dale leaned out the window spotting for clearance told Jim to move over a little more. As he eased over everyone could feel the big bus start to slide. When it came to rest, the RV was now on a forty-five degree angle with the passengers along with most of the contents piled together on the driver's side. Scrambling to safety the group now realized no one was injured but the RV was not going to be in service any longer. After a short pause to collect, their wits Jim and Dale headed into town. They returned three hours later driving two crew cab pickups.

The pair of pickups moved easily into town. Each were loaded with supplies taken from the RV, however the town and the lack of storage space in the new transportation meant some adjustments had to be made in methods of travel. Locating a small flat trailer at the rental place the first truck now became the working truck. Loading chainsaws, gas, oil plus a vast assortment of hand tools the front of the trailer was prepared for any road blockage. Jim remarked as they loaded chain falls and come-a-longs to the stack that the winch was going to be missed most of all. On the rear, the men now placed an ATV for advance scouting of roads laughing now but not at the time, the two men told Ray of how they worked for an hour to clear a blockage on the highway only to travel two miles and face one that could not be cleared. Jim shook his head as he told about how they backtracked six miles to find a new route. The women began stacking items in plastic storage containers; the bed of the second truck was now level with the cab. Ammo and food near the rear clothing and other supplies at the front. Strapping down the loads with tarps and bungee cords Dale stepped into the Army Surplus store yelling over his shoulder that he had a plan. Dragging a large box filled with spray paint on his return. "We should paint the trucks

camo to help hide them as we travel.” Grabbing cans the group began to spray black, green, brown and dark patterns over the shiny new trucks.

Assembled in a small barbecue restaurant the six travelers were exhausted from today’s work. Monica cooked the evening meal over a small fire built in large kitchen pans taken from the buffet. “Now” Lisa said starting to fill her plate for the second time, “We need to find sleeping quarters for the night, before we just pulled over. Now we must find shelter”. Darkness approached with the group assembled in the surplus store. Jim mounded piles of clothes and sleeping bags in effort to form bedding. Four folding cots were given to Ray and the women. Dale along with Jim would rotate guard duty tonight.

Spreading the map on the hood the group estimated they were ten miles from Lindsey. The men had taken to driving the front truck as Ray navigated for them. Following within twenty feet of them the women kept the second truck in tight formation. The truck allowed for easy travel moving between obstacles and the four-wheel drive permitted crossing the medians without fear of becoming stuck. “We should have switched to these after the first week”, Monica said as she wormed the truck between two wrecked semi trucks. “I agree” Lisa added folding the map. The cabs of the trucks were crowded as both had AR-15’s held in place by bungee cords to the dash, pistol grip shotguns stood between driver and navigator, magazines along with ammo boxes bounced with the trucks movements. The back seat held more ammo and coolers of food, leaving the rear passenger half of a seat to ride. Entering the front truck Jim reminded Dale that these people were armed and on the defensive so make no show of force and give them the letter of introduction quickly. Rounding the bend the two trucks slowed to a crawl spotting the heavy barricade covering the road from side to side. “I guess this is where we get out and walk Jim said looking to Dale for agreement. Nodding back, he replied, “What do you think about one of us going ahead to break the ice.”

“OK who should go?”

“Well I am rather hot tempered as you know”

“NO, not me, say it ain’t so”

I’ll take Monica with me so I don’t look as much of a threat.”

The others made a small campsite as the couple started their walk into the town of Lindsey. Patting the letter in his front pocket Jim looked to Monica saying,

“You can stay if you want”

“No it would be better if we went as a couple, that way you don’t look like a scout or something.”

Passing the barricade, they strolled down the road expecting to be challenged at any moment. It would be another two hundred yards until they reached the railroad tracks. Turning on them as Steve suggested, “most likely they will have blown the bridges leaving the tracks as the only way into town.” They continued until a voice boom from a hiding place “HOLD IT RIGHT THERE” stopping centered in the tracks and raising each hand slowly the pair waited for orders. The voice sounded out again. “What do you want?”

“We are part of the train crew that passed through here several weeks ago.”

“Can you prove it?”

“Yes, we have a letter from our leader to your leader”

Stepping from cover the man turned to the others saying, “Keep a sharp eye out while I take these people to see David.” With that, he walked next to them and said, “I sure hope you are who you say you are because we would like to know how things are going for them.” Jim reached his hand out saying they are anxious to know about all of you too.” Shaking hands, they moved down the track as Jim began to chat about what they had seen, and the train group. He also informed him of the others waiting down the road a few miles. David met them near the depot, “The lookouts radioed you were

coming". Reaching his hand to Monica and then to Jim. Jim pulled the letter from his pocket saying, "Steve said to be sure and give this to you." David opened it reading as they moved. Folding the letter, he turned saying "they are far along now."

"Yes and picking up more people every day."

"How many do you think?"

"Close to a hundred would be my guess"

"Were you with them when they came by here?"

"No we came later."

"Well we certainly owe them a lot"

David sent an ATV to bring in the rest of the group. "Do you mind if we take pictures while we are here?" Monica asked. "Not at all it will be good to show Steve and the others how much progress we have made. After everyone gets to meet you, we will give you the full tour of town." Word spread about the new arrivals and the news from outside. Gossip ran wild about why they were here.

Dinner was held like all meals in the dining room of the hotel. The residents of Lindsey had all opted to remain in the large old brick building. Several people knocked out walls creating suites. Ray and Hazel told the story about the *train people* as they were now called. When he came to the part about Tiff, small rivulets of tears moved down his cheeks. He was not alone in the room. Following Ray's talk Lisa gave the group details of their rescue. When she finished several people sat in shock, with one fellow telling his tablemates "You better not fuck with those train people or else." Hands went up all across the room as people starved for news asked about the war. Jim answered the best he could, telling of finding parts of rockets and planes with foreign insignias on them. He also added that they had not seen any troops of either side during their travels. In closing, he added, "I just can't tell you anything about the war or the government. Our range of information is strongly limited and that is one of the main parts of this mission."

As the morning came the group met in the lobby as, others filed out for work. David motioned for them to come into the meeting room. Inside he spoke with them about things they wanted to see and collect information. He also wanted them to see if it would be possible to establish a communication link between the two locations. "We could be a great help to each other along the way." Jim agreed, "Speaking, for Steve and the others they would very much like to keep in contact. Steve told us this was to be the first priority of our trip." David now posed the question on the back of his mind. "Could I send one of my people back with you to help get things underway?" Jim studied the question, without hesitation he suggested that two people go "because this has been a rough trip so far and I don't think a single person could make it". David said he had two in mind and he would meet with them today and give them an answer by dinner.

On the street, David walked the four *tourists* around town, Ray and Hazel had decided the walking would be too much for them. Pointing to a pipeline made from irrigation pipe he said, "We laid the first supply line for us using fire hose from the water tank. Now we have been able to replace it with this pipe. Plus, we have the city well back on line, but, we still depend on the fire truck for delivery into the tank."

"That is awesome, mounted in the supports it works like a water main."

"It is a water main just above ground. One of our projects is to have it completely insulated and covered by winter."

Next, he took them by a series of buildings where crews worked removing everything of value from it. He explained that some of the items plentiful now would be in short supply as time passed. "Much of what is taken now is cleaned and stored. We can't manufacture things like we once could and now we know how much we depended on imports. After the buildings are cleaned out, we next decide on the building as a whole. Strong made buildings like police and fire stations store vehicles for future use, car dealerships have all of the parts from stores in the city stored here.

We are using some building as warehouses and others will be torn down for material or fuel for winter fires.” A large parking lot had become a storage yard for wood and lumber tossed into large piles. “This is what I mean,” pointing as they went by. “If you need fuel for heating come and get it. As time passes the only building, remaining will be in use no empty firetraps. I must add fire is one of our biggest concerns, with limited water and resources a fire could end it all for us. That is another reason I want to get things cleaned up. It may be a long way between some of the best made building but they will last.” Now turning back into the main section of town David mentioned that he wanted to get as much of the worked complete by the first weeks of winter. He told them that one crew repaired the movie theater but had not told anyone because they wanted to save it for bad weather when people could not be outside in the evening. “There is so much to do and we all work well together I really think we will make it.”

“I think so to” came several replies.

“When do you plan to leave?”

“Most likely day after tomorrow, it will give your team time for preparations.”

“Well then I have a lot of work to do.”

With the evening meal, complete Jim made the announcement about their plans for departure. He did not mention the two people of Lindsey that were going with them due to fear that others may want to tag along. In closing of his remarks, he mentioned that the group would be happy to deliver any letter written to members of the train group. Also adding that their return trip was still a long way in the making, we plan to see more of the country with hopes of collecting information as we go. A voice rose from the back asking if they would return to Lindsey. Jim explained the plan to circle as far west as they felt safe with the return leg through the center of Tennessee and into the North Carolina Mountains. We have left maps and travel information with

David so that an effort to keep a line of communication can be established between us. This brought applause from the crowd. Monica informed them she had taken pictures of the progress knowing the people on the train would be happy to see how well things were coming along.

Meeting with the two travelers from town, the group offered them suggestions on things to take and things not needed. They also gave them copies of their maps, telling them they could take a direct route to the Biltmore and not make the long and winding loop they had planned, Dale had told them that if they chose to go on the others would appreciate it if they took Ray and Hazel. He went on to say that they were not a burden, but it was going to be several months before their scheduled return and they felt bad dragging them all over the country when they could be in more comfort. The town's people Brandon and Ken talked among themselves, deciding they would travel with the group until they felt comfortable striking out on their own.

Shortly before sunrise, David drove the crew to their truck stored in an old cleaned out shed. Shaking hands with each and wishing them well, he paused asking the two men from town if they were sure they wanted to go. Ken said, "I don't have anyone here to worry about so I might as well do some good for the group." Brandon said, "Same goes for me." The three trucks slipped into the unknown just a few miles from town. Each truck had a CB and the short-range walkie-talkies but even with this, they drove in silence never knowing who might be scanning the airwaves. The town truck painted to match the others and carried equipment piled to cab height secured with straps. Moving with only the aid of parking lights the convoy circled back to the west of town along farm to market roads. It would be several hours before they made a mid morning stop. Then only for about an hour, they looked over maps eating sandwiches and swilling down coffee. "We could hit Eaton in a few hours if the roads stay clean," Dale was pointing to the map. Lisa pointed to the map offering up the

suggestion of taking a smaller road to the Interstate. She added it could bypass the town and they did not need supplies now. The group agreed with her, no need in running into trouble with town's people if it can be avoided. After checking the trucks and short bathroom breaks, the convoy headed down Clarkson road hoping to intercept to highway in a few miles and by sunrise. To their delight at the intersection stood a truck stop with an empty parking lot, in the back of his mind Jim thought few bodies. Swinging the truck to the corner of the building Lisa pulled beside him with Brandon near her. Now the education of the two newest members began. Dale collected them at the nearby trashcan. "Few trucks mean few bodies inside, of course the staff will be there or what is left of them. Next, the power has been off for a long time so any food not in cans will be rotting. The smell will always be worse if the windows are intact. Thankfully, many of these are broken, but this means predator animals may have visited or could still be inside. Be careful."

Carrying fuel cans from the store to the fuel pumps the crew worked in a steady rhythm. When the trucks were stacked to capacity, exploration of the trucks began. First was a cargo of building material next were loads of machine parts, furniture and lastly pallets of dog food. "Well the animals will love this truck", Dale said as he tossed several bags to the pavement. Looking at his watch Jim hinted they should be moving down the highway. Brandon and Ken were heard to say that this was an eye-opener for them. The two young men were in the town of Lindsey when the war broke out and this was the first time they had seen any of the damage other than their town. Falling in behind Lisa, the two men talked as they drove

"Did you see the skeletons in the kitchen?"

"No I didn't look in there because I was afraid that is what I would see."

"Well it was bad, also the cab of that first truck we looked at."

"Why did you look in the cab?"

"I didn't, I caught a glimpse of the driver from the ground."

“Do you think it will be worse?”

“HELL yeah, that was a truck stop, wait till we get to a town or city.”

Ken followed closely, not speaking for several miles. They were driving down the opposite lane due to a massive traffic jam. At some point, the trucks made their way by using the median as a lane. “Thank the Lord for four-wheel drive,” Dale said. “I’m not sure we could have made it in the bus.” Jim replied. After a few miles the object of the traffic jam came into view, a bridge spanning a river approximately one hundred feet across had been the scene of a multi-car crash. With this lane, blocked drivers had attempted to cross to the other side forcing a mad rush through the median resulting in a pileup on the second side. Slowing to a stop the group assembled studying the entanglement. Dale walked forward to examine the possibility of towing enough cars apart to make passage. Ken followed Dale in effort to learn how to handle this. Thinking when we leave and strike out on our own for Biltmore I need to know how to survive these things, the truck stop image still lingering in the back of his mind. Stepping next to Dale, he asked, “What are you looking for to clear this?”

“Well, I want to see if they are entangled or just bumped together. Look at that *Fed-Ex* truck, the car next to it bounced off and into the guardrail. “

“So what does that mean?”

“We can pull the car clear and drive past the truck, if they were stuck together we would have to try and move both.” That would be more that we could handle without a lot of tools and work.”

“If we can’t get by we will have to backtrack.”

“Yep and means loss of precious time.”

“Can we get through here?”

“So far so good.”

Now they scrambled across the hood of a car to study the impact of a SUV. Walking by Ken looked into the window; he turned sharply stringing vomit as he went. Dale could hear him but never looked in his direction. "Don't look inside, these cars have been sitting here for a long time and each one is like a small greenhouse." Washing his mouth out Ken tossed the water bottle to the ground nodding his head in agreement. "Pray the windows don't break when we pull them." The pair worked across to the far side studying each vehicle for problems in separating them for clear passage. Reaching the far side Dale said, "I think we can make it but it is going to take a lot of work." Ken now began to ask questions as a student would question a professor.

"Did you find wrecks like this a lot during your trip to Lindsey?"

"Quite a few many much worse, many times we had to backtrack for miles. Of course we were driving a bus type RV then."

"Why not get another bus; it looks like it would be more comfortable?"

"It was we had electricity, refrigerator, in out of the weather, basically all the comforts of home, but it was hard to maneuver in cases like this and if we got into a gun battle we were a big slow target with lots of blind spots."

"Have you run into trouble on your trip?"

"Not yet but we have spotted several groups of people that didn't look friendly, so we steered clear of their towns or hid and let them pass by. Don't trust anyone one at first. They will use children or women in distress to bait you into the open. **I can't tell you enough**, go into survival mode and stay there."

Waiving to the group on the other side Dale motioned it was all clear. The two men now headed back across to hook up the chain and begin pulling open a lane for travel. The first car to move was still on the bridge. Ken looped the chain around the bumper as Brandon backed their truck up to make the connection. Dragging the car down the road about three hundred feet, it became evident this was going to be a

slow operation. Each car pulled clear banged other wrecks as it made its journey down the bridge and on to the open road. Dale told Ken "we aren't trying to clear the whole bridge just make a path large enough to get through". As car number six passed by it slammed into the *FED-EX* truck causing it to skid wildly dumping the cargo around the roadway, also it released the smell that had been encapsulated for months. Ken once again found himself leaning over the railing of the bridge. The task took over three hours but a slot cleared with a weary convoy moving down the right side of the road.

Jim spotted a sign stating a picnic area was one mile ahead; pointing to it, he called on the radio that they should stop for a rest and lunch. The time was now a little after three and they had been up before daylight. A group of six tables surrounded by large trees appeared to be the ideal location. Pulling in the sound of a small steam caught their ears; Jim said, "I bet a lot of kids fell in there after their parents to then to stay up here." Dale chuckle "And I would have been one of them". Using the grills for cooking Brandon and Jim collected wood as Lisa unloaded pots and plates. Monica was at work carrying food to the nearby table. Dale brought buckets of water up from the stream preparing it to boil for washing as this was completed he also topped of the fuel tanks so once on the road they would not need to stop. It was Ray speaking when the chores were completed. "That Hazel can make some good biscuits can't she?" Jim added, "Not to mention she did it on a grill and not with an oven." Brandon unfolded a map, asking Jim where they were and where was the Biltmore House. Using a highlighter, he now traced out the route taken by them also marking bad spots and major detours along the way. Pointing to the map he told Jim at this location, they most likely would part company so they could begin the journey toward North Carolina. Jim agreed saying that they could pick up the Interstate heading toward Tennessee from there.

Following a good afternoon siesta the crew moved toward the objective for the day. About ten miles from the town of Lancaster a small bridge with a dump truck and a car blocked the way. Pulling to a halt Ken, Dale and Jim made their way toward the bridge. Jim mentioned to Dale that this did not look like the typical wrecks they had encountered. Moving to the entrance the trio stopped to examine things. Shots rang out from several directions at once, Ken dropped at the foot of the bridge with several holes in him. Jim carrying only a side arm tried to open fire but could not tell where the shots were coming from. Dale had taken a hit to the shoulder, but was still moving down the embankment trying for safety. Behind them Brandon, Lisa and Monica had taken cover as their trucks were peppered with fire at the same time. With distance on their side, it was easier to spot the snipers. Monica drug Hazel from the cab with one hand as she reached for the AR-15. Moving into the ditch Dale pulled his shirt open to see the severity of his wounds; the follow up shot ended his concerns. Four snipers were well concealed; two of them had taken a position allowing them to shoot straight down the road, at a thirty-degree angle on each side one covered the flanks and were permitted deeper shots into the prearranged target area. Distances to benchmarks recorded, Rocky River Road now became Rocky Death Road. The wrecks were in reality two vehicles parked to block access. With targets at four hundred yards, Jim's handgun was useless; he could no longer see Dale but was certain Ken was done for. Crawling along the ditch, the fire lifted from him and seemed to be concentrated on the rear trucks. In the back of his mind he thought if they can box us in, we would be sitting ducks, we could never out run them in open country. Little did he know a scope followed his every move waiting for a clear shot. Parallel to the cab he noticed a string of well-placed shots into the windshield. Most of the time they would leave the doors open and the motor running when they stepped out to check things, from his point of view it was evident Ray died so quickly he still held the map in one hand and a coffee cup in the other.

Brandon took up position at the tailgate using the truck for cover. As he snapped a fresh magazine, he thought no wonder they wanted the guns and ammo stored in the rear. Providing cover fire for the women, they managed to work in slow intervals back to the rear truck. Monica parked Hazel in the ditch near the door telling her not to move a muscle until she said it was time to go. Lisa now sitting beside her said, "I can see Jim but not Dale." Turning to face her, she said, "he's gone I could see it." The color began to drain from her face when a close hit to the truck brought her back to reality. "We have to get out of here right now or we will all be killed. Grab Hazel and stuff her into the back seat, I am going across the seat to drive and you jump in the passenger seat. Got it." She nodded her head in understanding. As they waited for an opening, she could see Jim make a leap for the truck cab to retrieve a rifle. She could also see him when the bullet struck him spinning him on his back as he slid down the embankment. The second shot was a sniper's signature shot, center mass striking heart and lung. No doubt about it Jim was dead when he stopped sliding. "Do it now!" she yelled. Lisa grabbed Hazel and almost tossed her into the seat. The back was filled with coolers and boxes but somehow there was room on top for her. A round passed through the roof shattering the rear window with small cubes of glass peppering Brandon. Monica slid behind the wheel as Lisa still firing from the space between the open door and the roof post yelled to her to get things moving. Now, more than before the truck became the center of attention. Yelling through what had been the rear window Monica told Brandon jump in the bed and hold on tight. He did as he was told and none too soon. Stomping the gas pedal down the big truck shuttered as it began a high-speed trip in reverse. She backed the truck weaving from side to side unintentionally based on the size and speed of it. However, this proved to be at their advantage, spoiling the ability for the gunmen to line up a parting shot. After they felt out of range Monica pulled into a small entrance to a farm field turning

the truck around, once again she floored it putting as much distance from the firefight as she could.

Holding on for dear life Brandon bounced on top of the gear stored in the bed. When it appeared the truck was not going to stop for a long time he yelled to them to pull over and let him in. pausing in the center of Alton Rd. they took things from the backseat tossing them into the bed. Hazel now sat up for the first time after Lisa loaded her. Monica gripped the steering wheel, bowing her head she screams" MY JIM, MY JIM, MY JIM". Climbing from the cab, Lisa tear streaked walked up the road a few feet. Brandon moved to Monica's side asking if he could drive for a while. She moved to the back giving him right of way. Returning to the truck Lisa sat down not saying a word to anyone.

Fifty miles an hour seemed to be the best speed, he could handle the truck. Ahead a small country store came into view; it was at the crossroads of the two major farm to market roads in the county. Easing next to the store in effort to hide the truck from view Brandon stepped inside checking things out. Hazel had not spoken from the moment the first shot was fired. She now walked to a bench near the front door sitting with her hands folded she stared into space. Lisa and Monica stacked plastic milk crates forming makeshift stools. No one was speaking but all were seconds from exploding into tears or rage. Inside Brandon picked up cans of Spam, Deviled Ham, Pork and Beans trying to formulate some type of menu. Stacking things on the counter, Monica entered heading to the cooler at the rear she pulled a bottle of wine marching to the front as though she was going to pay for it. Nearing the counter she said in a broken voice "Give me some cigarettes."

"What kind do you want?"

"Just give me some fucking cigarettes!" Reaching behind the counter he handed her a pack as she picked up a lighter from the display case. Turning on her heels, she walked to the side door resuming her seat on the crates. Pulling a Swiss

Army Knife, the corkscrew popped open the bottle as Lisa lit them both a smoke. For the next thirty minutes, the two women who had been friends for a few years passed the bottle cowboy style until it was empty. Watching her as he tried to prepare a meal Brandon studied the store, pastry, bread, dairy all gone bad, more things we take for granite he thought. Looking for something to substitute for bread he said under his breath "I bet *Pringles* and Deviled Ham would make a sandwich that would taste like shit." Dipping the chip, his taste buds now verified his theory. Monica now entered the store again. Walking to the cooler, she now took two boxes of wine and a package of plastic cups, exiting without a sound. The improvised cooking surface heated the mixed menu of lunch but it was the best he could do. Carrying a plate and bottled water to Hazel, he said, "It's the best I could do." She reached for the plate speaking for the first time "we met when we were seventeen married at nineteen." Carrying plates to the other women, he noticed they were surrounded by a semi circle of cigarette butts, they each thanked him with Lisa eating but Monica only picking at her food. Sitting behind the counter he now surveyed the store fully. The majority of items were spoiled with other sections filled with useless merchandise. Thinking about what was lost and what was ahead he now moved to the rear filling plastic milk crates with items for the road, first was sports drinks, followed by bottled water next came canned goods. Trip after trip he stacked the bed to capacity. Opening the rear storage room a sight caught his eyes making him stop and smile for a moment. In the corner, a cat had taken refuge inside a banana box using the damaged exit door as it connection to the outside world. Moving slowly to prevent any sign of danger to it, Brandon stopped several feet from it. Even though the cat wore a plastic flea collar, its natural instincts had returned. Speaking to it softly he backed out of the room, attempting to locate some type of food to coax it out. A few feet down the aisle were several cans of tuna. Returning to the room, he now offered the cat a new treat instead of the scavenging it had been living on. Again, he backed from the room to allow the cat a feeling of

security. The evening was about to be upon them, so he asked the women if they would like to find an empty house for the night. Hazel just stared into space and the girls looking at each other remembering the house with the dead children. Lisa spoke at last "If you will check it out first that would be good". She was starting to come back to reality but she still was a borderline emotional rollercoaster. Leaving them at the store, he walked across the street to check out the brick ranch. Pausing at the door, he thought aloud, if they own the store and it was closed, they are probably in here. The door locked he moved to the rear finding the patio door broken. Stepping in he checked room to room finding it clear. "This should do," he said aloud. Looking back across the street, he spotted Monica walking out with more box wine in each hand. Thinking aloud he said "some people handle things in different ways, right now I would like to have a good stiff drink myself but I seem to be the one holding things together." Crossing back, he told the women that the house was good and they could go over anytime but he was going to load a few more supplies from the store. Picking up a fresh can of tuna, he now entered the storage room. Spotting the cat, he now presented it with more food and bottled water. The cat was less weary than before approaching him as he poured it into plastic containers. Everything now eatable had been piled into the truck including several boxes of wine. Darkness was upon them with the pair still smoking and drinking, Brandon kept rolling over in his mind that he had never seen either of them smoke before. Sweeping the glass from the cab he now ushered Hazel to a seat she still stared and had only spoken once, announcing her and Ray's age at their wedding. Returning to find the cat friendlier Brandon picked up the animal placing it in a box lined with newspapers and red shop rags. The cat went into the truck without a problem. Sitting on a crate, he told the women "I think we should get some rest and make plans for tomorrow." Monica looked him straight in the eye saying, "I met Jim when we were in the eighth grade". Looking back at her, he answered, "Hazel met Ray when she was seventeen." She replied "all of you should

go and rest I need time to drink and think.” Lisa stood, wobbly at first but regained her composure as she entered the truck. Crossing the road Brandon backed into the carport telling Lisa it has been a hard day for everyone, he also said he would sit and talk with her if she wanted but would respect her privacy if she chose. Pulling a flashlight from the box, she told him to help her with Hazel and then they could talk.

CHAPTER 42

Sitting on yard chairs sipping Bourbon and water found inside, Lisa opened up, she had known Dale for two years and their relationship was stormy at times but good at others. Dale and Jim had been friends from way back, she could not remember when. Jim and Monica had been sweet on each other from childhood. However, she had moved here only a short time ago, meeting them at the town Fall Street Dance. Brandon now spoke giving her a chance to collect her thoughts. He was raised in the south part of the county and Ken in the east. They had never met until the war forced everyone into the town. "I can't say much about him I don't even know his age twenty-five I guess". He confessed that he was one of the nameless-faceless kids in school. I never dated much and mostly spent my time on the farm. The effects of drinking wine and now bourbon began to take effect. Announcing she had better lay down Lisa stood to move into the house. Stumbling, Brandon caught her by the arm helping her inside to the front bedroom. Turning to him, she said, "Thanks I guess everything caught up to me, you aren't going to rape me are you?" "Don't be silly, you are fine, lie down and get some sleep." She stretched across the bed finding sleep in moments. Checking on Hazel as he returned outside he found her sleeping on the couch covered with an afghan.

Sitting back in the chair he began to think, I wonder if we will make it to Biltmore or even live until this time tomorrow. Lost in thought, the gunshot startled him to the point he almost wet himself. No one inside stirred, perhaps it was fatigue or alcohol but he alone was the one that heard the end of Monica's life. Knowing it and seeing it are two different things. Brandon approached the store the vision brought by the flashlight made him step back. She had placed the gun to her head and the shot pushed her body into the corner formed where the ice machine met the store wall. Brains and blood covered the white paint and the polar bear on the machine. Surrounding the area where she was seated were empty wine boxes, bottles, and cigarette packs. Turning to cross back to the house Brandon now discovered how visibly shaken he was. Saying aloud "it looks bad now ...I don't want to see it in the daylight." The bed brought fitful but needed sleep.

With morning brought a *Grand Canyon* size hangover for Lisa. Soaking her head in the sink, she moaned aloud that she should not drink. As the suffering took place in the hangover department. Brandon built a fire in the living room fireplace heating water for bathing and cooking. Metal buckets on the grating sent small traces of steam mixed with the smoke upward. Hazel stirred asking if she could help and Brandon put her to work searching for breakfast food. Thinking, "welcome back and I will keep you busy so you don't drift back to your depression". Entering the room with a towel around her head Lisa said, "Monica" and she knew without him saying a word. Sitting down she bowed her head rubbing it feverishly. "I guess I should have known." Leaving the room in the direction of the back section of the house, she said to no one special "I just can't cry anymore, I don't have anything left."

Ten minutes later Hazel called her to say breakfast was ready. She had taken flour and canned milk and other things Brandon retrieved by her request. The result was homemade biscuits with jelly followed up with coffee and grits. "Not bad for fireplace cooking" she said. Brandon looked at her. "Not bad for any type of cooking."

he replied. Lisa came into the room hearing the last of their conversation. She commented on how well the room smelled adding she was sorry for not helping. They discussed plans to make the trip to North Carolina; common knowledge was if they ran into trouble, a small group like them was not likely to survive. Lisa began "We must travel by every back road possible and steer clear of towns. What happened to us was clearly people defending their town and I feel sure it is playing out all across the country. We seen things like this before but not close enough that they felt threatened by us."

After the meal Lisa returned from the bedroom wearing a pair of jeans tucked into knee-high boots, a blue shirt topped off with a straw cowboy hat. Looking at Brandon, she said, "someone here was my size, do you think it is wrong of me." "Not at all, if you don't use them they will go to waste and that would be a shame."

Smiling she went out the backdoor to look for things in the sheds they could use. Hazel now laughed softly telling Brandon "That girl has her sights on you, and has from the time you joined the group."

"Not me."

"Yes you, you couldn't tell?"

"I guess not."

"Well honey she told me, only she was afraid it would cause trouble and maybe Dale would kill you"

"You're pulling my leg."

"Now honey, if you don't believe me I am going to come over there and smack you on that blond head until you do."

"Well I'll be"

Loading a few items on the now shot up and heavily packed truck the trio prepared to move out. The dash clock read 10:42, Hazel sat in the back where she could stretch her old tired legs out, or that was her story. However, she wanted to

push the couple together. Lisa took Brandon by the arm as he was about to start the engine, "Should we bury Monica?"

"It was rather gross to look at in the dark; I don't know how bad it will be now that we can see all of her."

"She wanted to join Jim, so I guess that's all that matters." As she spoke, she visualized the house they entered with the dead family. "Let's drive on".

When the truck started to roll the cat moved from the security of the box checking out Hazel and the contents of the cab. After a few moments, it found a spot in the floorboard and settled in for the duration of the day. During the first few miles, they retraced the route from Lindsey. At one point, they discussed returning to the town and finding someone that may want to travel with them to the Biltmore. The talk carried for several miles with both pro and con options heavily weighed. At last, Brandon said, "David might not want to spare anyone from the town because they will need the labor force in reconstruction." they decided to make the trip alone.

Midday found them outside a small crossroads, peering through the field glasses. Lisa looking left reported only the *Oak Level Church of Christ* and *Texaco Mart*. Brandon could see the *Dollar General* and schoolhouse. "How about it?" he asked. "Good" she answered. Back at the truck, they advised Hazel saying it looked good to them. The *Dollar General* had a larger variety of items that met their needs. Stacking water and food near the door the women decided to shop for other items as Brandon took the truck in search of fuel. Lisa unfolded a chair for Hazel near the door. Mixing *Crystal Light* in a container the pair waited for the return of the truck. Hazel told Lisa she wanted to see Tiff before she died but knew it was going to be a hard journey and was not sure if she could hold up to it. Lisa reassured her she would be fine but she also promised her that if something went wrong she would tell her the story of their journey and would look after her to the best of her ability. Hazel told her the

letters she received from Tiff and the one from Steve and Kathy made her feel confident Tiff was doing well.

Brandon pulled the truck up to the store. In spite of the appearance it was still a new truck, it just had lived hard. Tossing the loot onto the bed the women giggled about shopping, with an unlimited budget. "I put some pants and shirts aside for you to look at," Lisa said pointing to a pile. He scooped them up telling her how much he appreciated her looking out for him. As he moved to the rear to try on the clothes, Lisa turned saying "He knows, doesn't he?"

"Maybe"

"Maybe my foot, you told him."

"Well honey I just put the ball in motion the rest is up to you."

"Thanks, I just didn't know how to break the ice."

Yelling back to him "what's taking so long?"

He shouted back "I am trying to wash with bottle water, do you know how hard that is?"

"I'm a woman think of all the maintenance I need."

"Sorry"

Returning to the front in new jeans, boots and sporting a western style shirt, he grinned, "Which hat do you like the *John Deer* or the Little Bunnies?"

"This one" placing a felt stockman's hat on his head, "Yep! That's the one."

Moving on until dusk, they camped in a country church.

CHAPTER 43

The new crew moved out in the highrailer with orders to stay within five miles of the train. In addition to the highrailer, the train crew now added extra protection in the form of Jeff driving a single locomotive taken from the yard. The unit had been outfitted with the gun car and the flatcar used as protection. Planning for the possibility of ambush as had happened before the new unit offered speed and firepower to rescue the scout team if needed. Steve had spoke to the men now operating the highrailer assuring them help would now be only minutes away. Even with this rescue equipment, they were still nervous about the task assigned to them. The four selected from the list Kathy carried and were quietly determined to be expendable. For the next fifteen miles thing were operating in reverse as the train needed to back up to the switch that would open the line now to be used. Backing was not an easy task and the miles clicked off slowly.

The scouts made slow progress at first, in part of inexperience with the switches and reading the highlighted maps but mostly due to fear of the fate of the prior group. After the first day, things fell into a grove allowing them to reach the five-mile marker for Asheville. At that point, James, Jason along with Steve and Wes took over the rig. James and Jason were the only surviving people to know the yard and Danny.

CHAPTER 44

One week into their solo trip, the trio now traveled in more comfort. The truck replaced by a four door dually rode smoother and less drafty with windows and no holes. The cat roamed the cab searching for sun or a warm spot. Lisa had commented with fewer people to feed the main stops now were based on fuel. In one rural setting, they stopped midday to wash and do laundry under a small waterfall in a campground. Knowing the importance of meeting the train group, they traveled as

many miles possible each day pausing at times, for a half-day to rest and resupply. Preparing to leave the campground Brandon spread the map on a nearby picnic table. Lisa showing him the highlighted section and pointing to the location they left the group told him she did not know how far they had traveled by now but Steve mentioned they would stop short of the city before entering it to ensure it would be safe. Talking between the three of them, they agreed that any main city would be too dangerous for them, but they still would make better time traveling the interstate. Lisa spoke up reminding the group of something she had overheard in a meeting. "No matter which way the war went military troops would open the interstates as soon as possible for troop and supply movement. Also the areas surrounding it would be under marshal law." With that in mind, they decided to stay with traveling the back roads. "It will be slower and running into the roadblocks as we have so far takes up a lot of time but I guess it is still the best bet." They pulled out on to the county road heading east.

The church offered a dry place from the storm that seemed to bring rain and wind from every direction at once. Three soaked and weary travelers peered into the sanctuary to find it an ideal place to stop and ride out the bad weather. Brandon backed the truck up as Lisa motioned for him to stop short of the door. The big dually had a camper shell on the bed, keeping things dry but between it and the pouring rain visibility was poor for backing. Working quickly he tossed things to her and she relayed them to Hazel, sleeping bags, blankets, boxes of food followed by fuel for the lanterns and camp stove. As the two women, sorted things out, he now dashed to the cab retrieving several guns and the cat. Inside the cat now explored the building from top to bottom as only a cat could do. Hazel rolled out the sleeping bags and blankets as Lisa lit the stove to make coffee in effort to take the chill off them.

When things settled, Brandon read the boards on each side of the pulpit, "Enrollment 310, Attendance 156, Last Sunday 139. I take it by this we are near a small community, maybe we can check on supplies here also." The storm pounded

the building until the three of them thought the roof might come off at any moment. Around midnight the rains lessen but the wind howled causing the old building to creak and groan until sunrise. At first light, Brandon opened the door to survey any damage to the truck. The yard surrounding the building was standing in large pools of water. Not wanting to alarm the others, he walked out to see if the ground would support the truck. Thinking back to his days on the farm he said aloud "if I get this thing moving I better not stop until I reach the road or we are going to be stuck." Stepping back inside he told the women it had been a bad storm with limbs down in the yard and power lines along the road.

Loading the gear, he now locked in the four-wheel drive and began slowly applying power to prevent spinning the wheels. The big truck creped along until it reached the midpoint when it began to slip. Putting more power the truck began to spin but continue to make headway, never letting off; the truck clawed its way onto the road with a squealing of tires. Lisa patted him on the shoulder telling how proud of him she was, because she said with a crooked grin "I didn't want to get my new boots muddy digging us out." Moving down the road at twenty miles per hour large chunks of mud banged against the fenders with the sound of hailstones. Now looking at the map Lisa told him that a small crossroads laid ahead. "Do you think we should stop short and check it out?" "Yes he answered if it is large enough to support a church there may be people around."

CHAPTER 45

As the highrailer pulled into the yard, James spotted a man signaling from the yard tower. Easing the truck to a stop, he now stepped from the cab. Eyeing the stairs as the man scurried down to meet them. At a distance of a hundred yards, he paused with a rifle in hand. Shouting "FLASH" to the top of his voice. James smiled as he

shouted back "THUNDER". Turning to the men in the truck, he said, "It's OK they are friendly." Jason now exited the rig standing next to James the pair walked to the man. As they approached neither of the pair recognized the man. Within a few feet of each other, the man held out his hand saying, "my name is Mickey Clyde and I am part of the group assigned to watch for yawl, and I am sure glad to see you. We had just about given up on you." James shook hands with him say "for a time I wasn't sure we were going to make it. How have you and your group been making out?"

"We are doing alright but, you know things could be better."

"Any news on the rest of the country?"

"Just bits and pieces I will let Danny fill you in when he gets here."

Turning to a boxcar Mickey Clyde now yelled "This is the people we have been waiting for go tell Danny and the others." A tall thin man jumped from the car and dashed toward the tower. Turning back to the pair, he told them to come on in and make themselves comfortable. James motioned to the highrailer. Steve now moved forward feeling a ton of weight rising from his chest. Turning to Wes, he said, "It looks like we made it."

When the introductions were taken care of Mickey Clyde told them that Danny would likely be here in about an hour. Steve asked Mickey Clyde if it would be all right if the train came on into the yard. Mickey Clyde responded with excitement "hell yea buddy we can't wait to meet everybody." Jason offered to take the truck back and bring the much-awaited news. With a nod from Steve, he was turning the highrailer around. Steve reminded him to blow three blasts on the air horn as he approached to tell the gun crew that it was all clear.

The remaining members entered the first floor of the tower as Mickey Clyde told them about working in shifts to watch for them. He also told them that things with the other groups in the area were going well except for the people in Linville. "They just either don't trust anyone or don't want any contact with us. Every time we get near

them they chase us away and threaten to shoot us if we come back." He continued to talk as he made coffee. "Where do you plan to live, how many of you are there now, did you see others?" the questions poured from him like the coffee from the pot. Steve finally interrupted him long enough to say that he was going to tell every one when the groups were together. As they spoke the sound of a car, horn blared in the distance. "That will be Danny," Mickey Clyde said.

Danny now pulled up to the tower as James stepped out to greet him. Climbing from the cab of his truck, he grabbed James hand saying, "ole boy we had 'bout given up on you. Where is the rest of your crew?" James told him Jason had gone to bring the train, after a pause him told them about the death of the other two. The smile faded from Danny's face for a moment, when he spoke it was a more somber tone. "I hate to hear that, they seemed like nice guys." Introductions made with Steve and Wes. The group shared food and coffee straining ears for the sound of the train. It would be another hour before the sound could be heard coming through the valley.

As the people stepped from what most hoped would be their last train ride Danny shook hands and told them how glad he and the members of his group were to see them. He announced to them after they had gathered at the steps of the tower that his group had cleared the floors of a nearby hotel for them to use until they settle in their new home. In addition, he added they would come into town tonight to celebrate your arrival. The train crews went into actions as they had so many times before, but this time it was different. The final unloading, they had made it. Laughing and joking now as the feeling of security began to sink in. Crews moved into town with Mickey Clyde securing trucks for the movement to the *final temporary* quarters. As always, Jeff and Mark organized the train crew to help break up the cars making shorter cuts to handle supplies. Danny walked with Steve and James surveying the cargo. "My gosh!" he exclaimed "yawl brought everything but the kitchen sink" Steve turned to him saying "there might be one of those on board somewhere, we weren't

sure what we would find, so we picked up everything we felt could be needed." As they talked more about supplies, Marshall came forward to ask about a location for the stock. Danny suggested that the stock could graze on the local golf course. "it has fencing around most of it, plenty of water, great grass and let's face it no one is going to be using it for a long time."

Moving in the constant rhythm of stops past, the horses saddled, a cattle drive began through downtown Asheville. Trucks scurried shuttling supplies as the power team worked to restore lights. Danny watched in amazement as chore upon chore completed in smooth harmony. Turning to Steve, he questioned, "How did you get everyone to work so well without having to give orders?"

"Not necessary, we all know our survival depends on each other. Plus, we have done this so many times it is part of a daily routine. The hard part is when the train is moving and everybody wants something to do."

The hotel was an ideal spot for temporary quarters. The large kitchen was ready to receive a new staff and the dinning rooms were prepared with one section for eating and another open for a meeting that was sure to take place. "We did the best we could to get ready for your group" Danny commented as they walked by the front desk. Steve complemented him on the great job, telling him it was perfect in every detail. "Well the best is yet to come." Danny said.

"What do you have in mind?"

"Well the group thought we would give all of you a Smokey Mountain style welcome, tomorrow if your people are up to it."

"A welcome?"

"Yep, we have some smoked venison and right now the gang is at work barbecuing several shoulders from wild hogs we killed yesterday. Plus, we are going to bring a few instruments along and do a little picking. It's the mountain

way of getting to know our new neighbors. Do you think your people are up to it?"

"Trust me they are ready and it will give us a good chance to meet and talk about things.

"Great that is what we were hoping for."

After a few moments Danny excused himself saying he needed to get back and make sure things were going smoothly. Steve and James walked with him to his truck asking if there was anything they could do to help his people out. Danny turned as he was climbing into the cab responding, "If you have any medical people with you we do have several people that need attention." James went in search of Wes and Jan. the two men continued to talk in his absence.

"Do you have that much meat to spare, I mean to feed our group is no easy task."

"The wildlife is starting to return to this area and the wild hogs are starting to overrun everything. We have been trying to keep them at bay but I am afraid we are losing the battle. They breed like rats and destroy everything they come in contact with. Deer are plentiful so it is not any problem at all."

"Well when our stock gets more plentiful we will send you some of them so you can start a herd of your own, if you need them."

"We sure do all we have right now is a few cows and we are saving them for milk. Do you have a bull in your herd?"

"One and I have a feeling he is going to be very popular."

James returned with Wes and several boxes of supplies. Wes said that Blanca wanted to go with him and they would most likely spend the night. Talking with Steve he confided, "My experience is limited in many areas. If they had not had any type of medical aid until now they could be in bad shape, my plans are to return tomorrow with them." The group now piled in the truck and sped off leaving Steve to wonder if it

had not been better to ask Danny to send the people to Wes rather than have their medical aid leaving with people they only knew for a short time.

Inside the hotel, despite having most of the windows missing things were looking well. Cooking odors found their way through out the building and several of the smaller children ran about the lobby. The ground rooms once shops, now stripped clear of merchandise became sleeping quarters already marked by sleeping bags. Matt and Ryan returned from the upper floors reporting that it would not be a good idea for anyone to venture above the fourth floor. "It looks bad and smells bad," Ryan said. As they spoke in the distance the now famous wooden spoon, banging on a pot called everyone to the dining room for dinner. The meal was a light bill-of-fare due to the fact most of the supplies remained on the train for movement to the final destination tomorrow.

After the meal, Steve stood on a small stage at the meeting section of the room. The group pulled chairs into a semicircle as he began to speak.

"First order of business, WE MADE IT, we are here."

Yells, cheers and shouts rose to the point that it seemed they could be heard for miles. After the celebration died down Steve continued.

"I think at this time Jeff and Sister Carol should lead us in a prayer of thanks." The pair moved to the stage, heads bowed with a true prayer of thanks offered by each person present. Steve now resumed the meeting with more serious items for discussion.

"We need a team to go to the house and make preparations to receive all of the cargo. Next, we need teams to unload the train and teams to transport the goods. This will be the reverse of the way things have been done in the past. Yes Larry."

"How long do you think it will take to have things completely put away?"

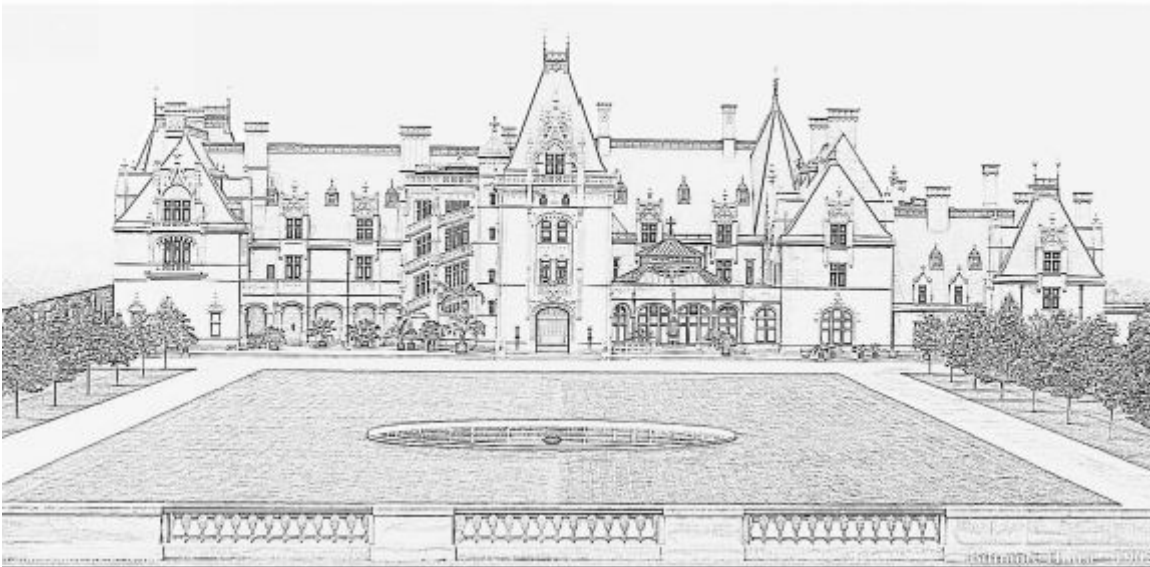
"I don't know Larry that is a good question, perhaps we should work out the details after this meeting is over. "Next"

"What will our relationship with the surrounding groups be?"

"It is my hope we can work together on common projects like power and water. I also hope we can trade goods and services with each other like good neighbors, but I am sure they will expect us to feed ourselves and pull our own weight. After what we all have been through cooperation is a must. But security is still needed."

The meeting lasted over an hour with many good points of discussion brought forth. Now that this was, their home concerns that were not raised on the trip came to surface. Several new committees appointed with plans to meet the first full night the group occupied the house. On the closing note, Steve told them of the plans for tomorrow and the welcome by Danny's people. Laughing and smiles moved across the room. In the back, a voice was heard "Do you think they will bring us some of their famous moonshine?" Looking to the back Steve squinted asking, "is that you Jason?" A red face Jason replied "not me it was Matt." With that reply, the room fell apart in laughter. Steve could now see the tension of the journey was subsiding; inside he could feel it to. Earlier in the evening Kathy had spoke to him about how relived she was and the Marci had almost cried when she stepped from the train for the last time.

Kathy along with Tami and Marci headed up the first group to explore the Biltmore House or the *House* as they now referred to it. Standing in the grand foyer she said "We must preserve the things here and not let them be damaged after all they could be the only small portion of history that survives."



The

trio covered the bottom floor room-by-room, no small task by anyone's measure. Pausing for a light lunch, they met with other groups that had researched the outside and other buildings for damage and potential usage. The members all reported things were in good shape with minor repairs required. Sara and Tiff were the designated information runners, taking a report written by Kathy they started their truck to head back to the hotel that was serving as the operations center. As they prepared to leave Kathy cautioned them, "We are in a safe area but still be careful, it is possible bad guys have entered the area." "We will" assured Tiff as the truck pulled away.

Across town, Marshall and Jose along with their families and several volunteers began rounding the stock from the golf course. The decision was to drive the stock to the house rather than load them on trucks. At the same time, James working with a team backing trucks to the loading dock at the train depot. Mark working the main cut of cars with Jeff doing the switching placed the cargo in order of importance for transport. Steve accompanied by Larry and Matt searched the nearby armory for any additional supplies that were needed. In the back of his mind Steve, keep thinking repeatedly, "we are spread out all over the place if something happens we may not be able to reach each other in time." He also was worried the Wes and

Blanca had not returned. Turning the corner the trio spied a large group of RV's sitting on a lot. Larry turned to Steve asking, "These buses are the size of many mobile homes".

"Yes they are."

"Do you think it might be possible for some of us to live in them instead of living in the big house? I mean still live on the property but live outside of the house."

"If you wanted to, I don't see why not. After we are settled many of us including Kathy and I would want a home alone. As a matter of fact the big house may become the storehouse and town hall and other government function building as well as shelter in time of attack like the castles of old."

"Do you think we should bring it up to the AD-HOC committee?"

"Not right now let's get things settled first."

They now turned back toward the hotel anticipating the arrival of others for tonight's meeting and barbecue with Danny and his group. The evening was going to be the first time in a long time that the group let their hair down and had a good time. Inside they found Danny and members of his group working to make arrangements. Danny introduced the men to the members as they passed by. He now informed the men that his group consisted of about seventy-five people. Taking a small table in a corner the men settled to talk about things for the future. "We would like for our group to have a strong working relationship with your group." Danny began. "Same here" Steve replied.

"How did things go with Wes and Blanca?"

"Great, they were much needed and their presence gave the people a lift. They are planning to return with the others tonight."

"Do you think we should hold the meeting of the two groups before or after the entertainment?"

"Before, I think once the party starts no one will want to talk business."

As they spoke, the men were making notes for the order of the nights festivities. Writing on a legal pad Danny asked who would do the introductions and get things rolling Steve told him his brother Jeff was the best speaker of the group." He was a Chaplin at the area hospital so he is great at public speaking plus he can give the invocation at the meal unless you have someone in mind."

"No that will be fine with us we don't have a person to fill that role.

" Where will you be during all of this?"

"Somewhere in the crowd."

"I plan to do the part for my group."

Tiff and Sara entered the room searching for Steve. Spotting him at the table the two young girls walked briskly over handing Steve the note before taking a seat. Studying it, he told them to bring everyone back it was almost time for the meal and he would talk with the ladies when they arrived. As the girls dashed out with the news, Danny looked at the men asking the question Steve had been expecting. "Tell me if you don't mind what types of people are traveling with you?"

Steve pulled a small cigar from his pocket offering one to Danny and the others at the table saying, "better smoke them now in a few weeks they won't be any good." Several of the men took him up on the offer. Now turning toward the mountain group he began, " Well we have one black girl you just met her, one family that is part Comanche, three families that are Hispanic, two families that are Asian, maybe a gay one or two, Catholic, Jewish and Protestant and some I don't know. I never asked, because I think its things like that that probably started this war. But I can tell you this they are all good people, because the ones that caused us problems along the way were put out of the group."

"I didn't mean any harm I was just curious. What did you mean the bad ones were put out?"

"Just that, we put them out, James explain things to the group while I step out for a trip to the head."

James now went into detail about how his group and everyone but twelve were rescued along the way by the *Texas Team* as he called them. "They picked up and rescued people along the way; in the case of my group we were facing certain death. Trapped by a self-proclaimed president we were fighting for our lives and losing. They engaged them as the enemy they were; the end result was something out of a movie. Not only did they save us, but also in the process, they blew up an entire town, **yes, I mean an entire town**. If you can, talk with the people tonight and get them to tell you their story, some of them will make the hair on the back of your neck stand up, others you won't believe, but they are true. As for the part about getting rid of the bad ones, we have a court system based on the Ten Commandments and the Constitution, if you are found guilty you are banished for life and shot on sight if you are seen. There are other things I could tell you but I see him returning"

Steve now returned carrying a bottle of *Wild Turkey 101* and bottles of water. Placing the goods on the table as he sat he said, "In Texas we dearly love our whiskey, but we don't drink with people we don't respect. Would of any of you like to join me in a drink?" every hand reached for a glass. Danny looked at Steve saying, "I had no idea that your group was made up from people along the way, we just assumed that all of you left Texas as one group. James told us things that truly amaze us, I would be proud to drink with you."

The room was filling up with members of both groups. The mountain folks brought instruments along with boxes of food and cases of beer. Turning to Danny, Steve told him he now understood why it was better to get business out of the way first. "When they get to playing and singing I know our people are going to have the time of their lives." "So will we, so will we and yawl better join in" replied Danny. Catching Jeff as he entered the room Steve told him he was on deck tonight as the

representative for the group. Jeff nodded his head telling him he felt he should do it. However, Steve insisted he was the better speaker and had better people skills. Jeff agreed to do it but under protest.

The *Train People* as they were known brought large pots of food, beer and bottles of wine as they came in from the hotel kitchen. The thing that caught their eye was the large piles of smoked venison and barbecued pork, killed, cooked and sliced by the locals. After eating canned meat for the entire trip except when a few deer were shot this was like manna from heaven. Danny along with Jeff moved to the stage at the head of the dinning room. The stage was actually rows of wooden boxes covered with plywood. The two men introduced themselves to the crowd. Applause and welcome remarks came from the assembly that now numbered nearly two hundred. Each of the speakers made remarks of how glad they were to be here and they looked forward to working together to try to rebuild this section of the world. Danny told his group to meet everyone they could, and hear the story of their trip. The locals starved for news from outside region would surely do that before the night was over. He also made it a point to recognize Wes and Blanca for coming to their town and rendering medical aid, applause followed by thank you came from every corner of the room. Danny now turned to Jeff asking if he would bless this meal. Jeff began the prayer of thanks including the safe journey and being remindful of those that did not survive; he added how thankful they were to receive a welcome by gracious people.

The gathering now in full swing, each group exchanged information about what they had witnessed, everyone had heard President McKenzie's radio speeches and all agreed they were recorded and ended on the same day. People moved from gathering to gathering talking about different topics most of them were on the subject of recovery. The first hour passed without notice, then the second. At last, Danny took the stage asking if someone would come forward and tell the local group about their form of belief and the type of government they had established. Jeff moved forward,

standing next to Danny; he began the task of how the group was made of a collection of people from along the trip. He also mentioned the various religions and backgrounds involved. He explained how the group chose established a form of government. "With fines and jail not practical we adopted the form of banishment." Jeff covered the topics of concern and concluded by taking questions from the crowd. Danny moved back to the front saying he would like for a collection of his people to meet with the AD-HOC committee and work out details involving trade of goods and services between the two locations. Heads nodded, as he spoke. He now suggested everyone put on their dancing shoes and break out the instruments. Shouts of joy and excitement occupied the room when the music began to play. The collection now began to mingle more freely and conversations and cold beer flowed. It was late in the evening before things wound down. Kathy told Steve as they sat talking with others, "no one will leave hungry tonight, and can you believe all of the food. The barbeque was good but I still think Texas style is the best." Laughing he told her "I ain't putting my dog in that fight." Waving his brother to the table, he told him what a good job he did and he knew it was a good choice to volunteer him for the job. Jeff thanked him as he pulled up a chair joining the group. The musicians announced the next song was for the Texans as they broke into *Amarillo by Morning*. Tami searched out Jeff saying, "Come and dance they are playing our song." Kathy nudged Steve telling him to get up also.

The morning brought work parties back to the task. Danny approached Steve showing him the town of Woodfin on a map "this is where we are at, most of the group want to get back to their homes and check on things. You are welcome anytime. I would like to stay behind with a small group and iron out the details on working together if you have time." Steve told him that now was the best time and he would gather the committee. Kathy brought her binder to the meeting; it outlined each person with his or her occupations and skills they possessed. Danny flipped through

looking at page after page, murmuring aloud "oh my gosh how organized you are, you have a profile of each person in the group. What do the red X's on the pages mean?" She replied with a somber tone, "They did not survive the trip, but I didn't want to pull them out." "Sorry, very sorry" was his reply. As the meeting went on both groups discovered they had talents that the other needed and in several cases they could pool their workforce to take on jobs that required more than one workers than had been previously been available. Mark now asked if the other towns in the area would like to meet and work out similar swaps of resources. Danny assured him that it was likely and he could try to arrange a meeting with all of the leaders. Next, they began a list of things that could benefit all of the communities. Kathy wrote in a feverish pace to list ideas as they were tossed out for discussion. The final list included,

A mail rider to travel from town to town.

Distress signal that could be sent if under attack

Attempt to restore electric power. Although everyone agreed this, would be a long-term project and needed to be worked out by the five electricians or electronics people now among the groups.

A type of telephone system between towns, again only one person with telephone experience was among the surviving.

An agreement that if a person was banished from one town they could not enter another.

All towns would fly the American flag but would need a flag from the community for identification purposes. This would need to be a new design to prevent outside forces from gaining entry to the secure towns also a seal to stamp papers to insure they were correct.

Mutual aid in the event of fire, medical emergency or other disasters.

To locate and store long-term supplies and equipment from outside the area, to a central warehouse.

The meeting adjourned with both parties feeling that a long lasting relationship had been formed. Talk among the committee as they drove to the house was the big meeting yet to come and the progress of preparations in the settlement of the house.

Arriving back at the house the committee met a group standing guard at the gatehouse. Pulling to a halt Steve spoke with the pair of sentries.

"How is it going today?"

Great you won't believe your eyes when you see how much had already been done."

"Have there been any problems so far?"

"No we are mostly directing traffic. At the rate trucks are coming and going it is like an interstate rather than a driveway."

As they spoke, another convoy of trucks passed by heading to the house with loads of farm supplies. The group now headed up the three-mile drive to join in the activities. Mel at the gate was right, in the large grassy area surrounding the fountain, Michelle rode heard on the horses as they grazed. To the far left Carlos and Matthew kept a close eye on the cattle, Barbara now moved among the heard snorting and making his presence known. The Suburban pulled to a stop with Kathy stepping from it almost the instance it paused. Moving up the large steps, she entered the foyer finding Blanca and Tami working from a large table. Each surrounded by legal pads and maps of the house and estate. Two-way radios crackled as chatter from teams storing supplies communicated. "How can I help?" she questioned. Blanca handed her a pad and a map saying, "soon food supplies are coming and we need several large rooms for storage, see what you can find."

CHAPTER 46

Steve and James now located Mike with the power team as they prepared to receive the generators and equipment from the train. Pausing he briefed them saying they could have power for the evening in a few hours but it would take a few days to have the house fully operational and a week or more to have the remainder of the buildings up to working order. Leaving his son behind the pair now located Marshall and Jose on horseback as they rode toward the house. The group talked briefly about the livestock and preparations need to face the oncoming winter. The committee will talk with you later on all of your needs and suggestions you may have. The pair made several stops before returning to the house. Marci met them as they entered, "We need to decide where everyone is going to eat and sleep tonight." She said in a matter of fact voice. Steve caught by surprise asked what problems were taking place. She explained that with all of the movement of supplies and equipment that no one had made preparation for the meals and lodging for tonight. "Everyone is scattered and it will be dark in a few hours, so we need to pick a location to feed them and bed down for the night." Answering her as they walked into the house, he said they would stay in the hotel one more night and judging by the rate of progress the house should be in order for occupation tomorrow. Marci now dashed away to find the kitchen crew for the night meal and head to town.

At the hotel things settled in after the meal with a meeting, that everyone had anticipated. The Ad-Hoc Committee presented a detailed report with information collected earlier in the evening. Taking the stage Steve began by telling the assembly how well things were going and presenting the short term and long-term goals. The short-term projects needed completion by winter. The main priority surrounded a working water system, fuel for heating and cooking, sanitation and food for people and livestock. After discussion on each topic, at one point, the floor was flooded with questions and the meeting became a brainstorming session on how to solve each problem. The long-term projects brought forth. The news of meetings with surrounding

groups brought relief among the gathering. Steve went on to explain the mail delivery system, mutual aid during emergency, law enforcement and shared services. Ending this list of items he quickly added, all of these things are subject of approval by this group; after all, we are a democratic government here. Troy now came to the stage outlining the water system plans adding he would like to start as quickly as people became available from other task. "I think we can complete it in two weeks if things go well. Jose now stood giving the report on the livestock, "We have secure pastures to graze the stock, after today's completion of the fence line ride. However, we would like to keep them close by for a few weeks until things get settled." He also added any feed or grain and hay located would be of help for the winter months. Marshall now stood giving the farm report, "Through good planning we brought most of the equipment with us. But, we still need to locate a few items. Seed and fertilizer are always welcome so any search teams let us know if you find them". Mike gave a short but encouraging report, "power will be restored in a few days. Several of us are looking at windmills and solar to support our generators."

Steve now stood addressing the assembly, "On several occasions people have asked me about living outside of the main house. Now that we are all here and settled, I would like to speak on that matter. While the house is large enough to hold all of us, I think we can all agree that sometimes a little privacy is nice too. Larry and I located a large RV dealership as we returned from the armory. Anyone wanting to move one on to the property can certainly do so. But, I advise you to stay close to the house for security purposes. In time, we may turn the house into the town hall, school; library, medical center and anything need by us. Danny and his settlement offered to come over in the spring and help raise any buildings we may need. I also found several log cabin manufacturing companies in the phonebook so we can get these plants back in operation and produce homes for anyone. But, I need to remind everyone again, the world is still a crazy place so the big house may be our defensive

strong hold so let's live and work as a small settlement. The committee has worked to solve problems to the best of their ability but remember we still need input from everyone; this is your home and community. Are there any questions that we can answer at this time?"

The meeting carried on for several hours as suggestions and topics of discussion moved around the floor. Concerns for the future ranged from security to allowing new people into the community and the topics of education for the children now and in the future. When this question surfaced Tami, who had been a school principal before the war stood advising everyone of the plans to establish a school as soon as things had reach a normal flow of life. She stated the nearby towns had requested a teacher, or lessons be delivered by mail rider. In conclusion, she added, all of the people in this area are concerned about the future and the children of today will be the key to tomorrow." Next Mike stood speaking about the power situation. First let me say we can have power to the entire house by tomorrow, next with the limited supply of fuel on hand we can run the generators until midnight each night. If you chose to bring an RV on site most of them have small generators and that will give you more lead way in how you use them. According to several of the local people I have spoken with the power company operated a hydroelectric station not far from here. These plants run on the flow of water through turbines, therefore no fuel is required. I plan to take a team and look at them as soon as things are settled here. Bringing the plant back into service and stringing new power lines to the communities could take a year but I feel we have the talent to do it." Cheers erupted as though a winning touchdown or grand slam homerun was scored. The return of electricity meant so much, lights, cooking, refrigeration, heating, the ability to operate machines, in essence the return of a large portion of life that had been missing for so long. Troy now followed with the water report, "In following with the good news, I have been testing the water for chemical residue or other harmful agents and can say most of the

small steams are back to normal but let's be cautious of the rivers and ponds for the remainder of the year. After the snows of winter, things should be back to normal. But listen closely, treat this water as you would before the war, don't start drinking straight from the streams without boiling it first. I would like for us to begin work on a series of sand and charcoal filters as soon as possible, and install several wells as soon as the time can be arranged." Questions followed the meeting as report after report was given. By the time of adjournment, everyone felt better about the future.

Danny made contact with the groups in Spruce Pine, Swannanoa and Black Mountain. Each of the communities welcomed the opportunity to send representation to the meeting in hope of establishing assistance and trade. When the news reached Biltmore, Steve decided to hold a town hall meeting. To establish the new form of government and offices needed to bring the community together. The dining hall filled with everyone as Steve and the Ad-Hoc committee moved to the front calling the room to order. Standing on a make shift stage he asked for quiet. The room now fell silent as he asked Sister Carol to open the meeting with a prayer. Upon completion, Steve made the announcement regarding the pending meeting with the surrounding towns, next he suggested they appoint a Mayor and council members. From the back of the room came a voice, "Why don't you be the Mayor and let's keep the people we have now." Smiling Steve said, "Thanks but I don't think I am the right person for the job, I can work in the field but I don't think I am what we need at this moment. I would like for each of you to think of someone that you think will be better for the day today running of the town. I would like to suggest my brother Jeff. "Jeff's face had the look of a person that had won the lottery and been shot at combined. He started to rise from his seat when Steve motioned him down. "The reason I suggest him is, he is college educated with several degrees, and his job as a Chaplain required people skills, in addition he has the experience to make decisions requiring forethought and planning."

Stepping back Steve now scanned the room looking for any signs of disagreement. "Now" he concluded, "Is there anyone else that would like to nominate someone?" No one raised a hand. Steve now asked for a vote by a show of hands. Jeff was elected by a one-hundred percent vote. Turning to Jeff who still had the look of dismay Steve motioned him to the stage. "Mister Mayor the podium is yours". Loud clapping now occupied the hall as Jeff moved forward. Speaking with a touch of surprise in his voice he began, "Thank you for this honor, I will do my best to not let you down. As the first Mayor I would like to say that at this point we should agree on a term limit." From the back of the room Mark called out, "Limit you just got elected." Laughter erupted for several minutes as a red-faced Jeff shook his head. Speaking again, he said, "I think two years is enough before a new election should be held. Is that in agreement with everyone"?

The meeting concluded with a mayor and six members of the council selected by voting on a ballot. Jeff caught up with Steve as the hall cleared, "Why me he said."

"Why not, you are educated, have great skills and I can't think of anyone who could look after the group better."

"After all of the work you put in getting this group here you should be in charge."

"No most of what I did was experience and common sense, what they need now is common sense coupled with wisdom and that brother is what you are blessed with."

Jeff now collected the council for the meeting in Asheville, with the outlying towns. Each of the communities agreed to the proposal of using flags flown beneath the American flag. Using the Navy phonic alphabet system each town would fly the flags with the beginning letters of their town. Biltmore would fly B and H for Biltmore House, Spruce Pine would use S and P. The hurricane flag was selected as the distress flag to be used as a silent warning if the town needed help but could not call

for it. Next, each town agreed to send work crews to the hydro plant to assist in getting power to the area. Mike had spoken to the group telling them that the plant using only water flow to generate power was the easiest method. He went on to explain further the plant most likely went off line by a turbine trip when the power lines went down this means most of the work will be installing new lines and transformers. His estimate was one year to have the task completed. Shawn from Swannanoa worked for the local telephone company before the war, now took the floor. "I think we can work out a telephone system between towns. It will be the old switchboard style requiring an operator to be on duty, to route calls, but it will keep us in contact. The military used a similar style for field command centers during World War 2 and Korea. With a little help we can have one in operation in a month." This announcement brought excitement to the meeting, now no town was isolated and fending on its own. Other items agreed upon were the monthly gathering at the courthouse in Asheville. This would permit a judge and jury to hear cases from other towns allowing impartial juries, to insure fairness to all people. On the same weekend, each town's medical, dental and veterinarian teams would come to assist with routine care. Anna was the only dental professional in all four communities. Biltmore had one nurse and a paramedic with Spruce Pine supplying two EMT's, two Vet. Techs. This collection made up the health resources for the region. A key topic of discussion was supplies for the future. Each community wanted to form a team to venture from the area and bring back supplies and equipment, however, the use of trucks would invite ambush and the location of the towns. With the train in the picture, everyone felt it could haul the most goods over the longest distance while providing the best security. All members at the meeting felt they were making good progress in establishing the regions return to a civilized order. They planned to meet in another few weeks to discuss how the topics were received at the communities.

Jeff now with the council, returned to brief the assembly at the house. He planned to hold meetings each Sunday after church to keep everyone informed of the activities. Things were moving at a fast pace as each team and person worked to prepare for the coming winter. The yard now filled with bus style RV's as predicted by Steve. Many people desired privacy and living in the big house did not feel like home to them. Many of the down stairs rooms were converted to serve as public rooms. Several were reserved as schoolrooms; one filled with medical equipment served as a clinic, the main dining hall became the meeting room for the Town Hall sessions and others packed as storage. The beautiful library remained a library only with thousands of new books stacked inside to find shelves. The community continued to move in a positive direction with most of the people gathering in the evening for the meal and talk about the day's activities. A rotating staff, each team lived in the house for one week operated the large gatehouse, however, several people asking to stay in a permanent position had approached Jeff.

The next meeting proved to be a lengthy one. Robert and James headed the security team bringing several new ideas to the council. First, they improvised a security barricade at the roads by pushing two cars together. In the trunk of one car, a one-foot section of four-inch PVC pipe filled with black powder taped to a pair of propane tanks. Inside the pipe, a trip wire running to the other car could detonate a shotgun shell hooked to a mousetrap as a triggering device. Any attempt to move the cars and clear the road would lead to sudden death for a fifty-foot radius. Wildlife or stock grazing in the area could not trigger the security device. Next on their list was the removal of all road signs that could provide information or directions to the *House* location. The last item presented by them was to install gun safes at all outbuildings throughout the property to assist any teams in the event of sudden attack. The council now heard from Marshall and Jose heading the stock and farm report. They felt the animals were well equipped to handle the upcoming winter, however they requested

all available people for the spring planting. Troy now presented the water request; he needed several people to assist in the construction of a series of filters. The design as he explained was to construct several large tanks or pits with open tops, each container must be filled with a minimum of ten feet of clean sand and twenty feet in diameter. Water poured into the tanks at a rate of five gallons per minute, filtering through the sand exiting to the next tank. After traveling through three tanks, the water would be fit to drink, by Troy's estimate. He also suggested that bleach added for the first few months to help in purifying. After the filtering process, the water is transferred into several holding tanks for, distribution to the people. He closed his report stating most of the work would take place up the mountainside to allow gravity to aid in the flow of water. Turning to Mike, Jeff now asked about the power situation. Mike began by stating the fuel supply for the generators was adequate to carry the community for several months; however, he would feel more comfortable if several more tankers of gas and diesel were on hand. Turning now to the subject of the power plant Mike stated he wanted to take two people from here and several from the surrounding towns to examine the plant and start preliminary repairs before winter hit causing damage to exposed areas. He went on to say if they made an assessment now on parts needed it would give them time to collect them. "When the first sign of spring comes, we can be ready for the outside work." Jeff questioned how soon he could leave and the time required for a full evaluation. Mike replied, "Tomorrow afternoon and we should be back in a week." Now turning to his brother Jeff began "OK I saved the best for last." Steve and Mark bowed their heads in a mock salute. Steve began, "after the meeting with the other communities, they have expressed the need for supplies and agreed to send people to work the train during supply trips. Also per the meeting, the city will be the central storage area allowing everyone to resupply their towns as needed." Jeff now developed a serious look asking the question that was on everyone's mind. "How many trips, how safe would they be and where would they

need to travel to for the needed supplies.” The two men responded with a detailed plan. “First” Mark said, “We send out scouting parties in three directions, there is no need in taking the route we came in on because we know it is picked clean, Danny marked sections on a map showing good and no contact areas. The scout teams need to be trained in operating a highrailer, reading the different maps, working switches and most importantly keeping a low profile because they will be on their own with no help for hundreds of miles.” Jeff turned in his chair facing them directly saying, “train several teams, but I don’t think this is a mission for either of you two to undertake, frankly we can’t afford to lose either of you.” Grinning back at his brother Steve said, “We know, we have already been told by our wives.” A small chuckle flowed through the meeting. Asking for any other business to be brought forth, with none presented the meeting closed leaving respective teams to handle projects.

CHAPTER 47

James sat in a meeting with members from the nearby towns studying maps of the region



. Keith one of the two members from Spruce Pine pointed to the maps saying, "If we put the detour signs here we can route traffic east toward the main highway taking them away from here." The team formulated a plan using signs from the Department of Transportation. Placing them at locations along the highway, they could detour any traffic coming into the area away by posting Road Closed, Bridge Out, and Detour or simple barricades declaring the road impassable, Greg suggested whenever possible the presence of construction equipment would reinforce the illusion. The committee proposed to route the most traffic to I-40 and I-26 then block the roads with landslides and vehicles causing travelers to return down the mountain rather than pursue alternate routes on the back roads. As they studied, the map a distance of thirty or more miles for a buffer came to be the accepted range between roadblocks and the first sentries. All involved agreed the task of locating signs, cones and barrels would be time consuming and the placement would take nearly two weeks to complete due to the fact most of the work would be undertaken at night to prevent any scouting parties to observe the roadblock going up.

As other crews prepared for the coming winter Jeff felt it necessary to install a large whiteboard in the foyer of the House to keep track of teams and work in progress. This board also let people know everyone was working on certain task and would be gone from the community for a period. As he sat in the front room working on several plans, Bill and Carl stepped in to speak with him. The two men told Jeff they were experienced outdoorsmen with no family members in the community. Bill confided to Jeff that one of the things they had noticed was the need for information about everything. "We would like to take a horse apiece plus one as a pack animal. This would allow us to travel quietly and travel off road when necessary. Most of the equipment can be scavenged along the way."

"How long do you plan to be gone?"

“Around a year unless we discover something you should know about sooner.”

“What is your departure date?”

“We can be ready in twenty-four hours.”

“We already have four people in a RV working their way through the route we came and moving further south in regions we didn’t cover, but they have been gone for a long time with no contact. The information you gather will help not only our community but the surrounding area as well. Good luck to the both of you and don’t forget the password for your return. I will speak with Jose or Marshall about getting horses for you. But, I must ask that no one knows of this or we will be swarmed with adventure seekers that have no business out there.”

The men left to collect the needed gear, Jeff rode to the barn. Inside Jose told Jeff he had three horses that would work for the trip. “They are geldings so they are of no use for breeding only working. This will not upset our plans for increasing the size of the herd.”

At first light the pair of explores met Jose in the barn. Each man carried an M-16, pistol grip shotgun, 9mm. Bill also slid a scoped 30.06 into a scabbard as Carl packed a full-size shotgun in his. Telling Jose, they now had defense and hunting taken care of. At first glance, the packhorse now loaded with food, camping equipment and extra ammo made a full load. Each of the lead horses carried maps and journals for completion by both men. Jeff had suggested this in the event they became separated or one was lost. With a wave to Jose, the two men slipped into the morning fog feeling like modern day Lewis and Clark.

As the pair began their adventure, another group reported for railroad school. Mark and Steve now had twelve people in the gathering. Coming from the surrounding towns, they were going to be the scout teams for the railroad supply missions. Mark started the class by covering the basic types of switches, how to operate the manual

style and by pass the electrical ones using the override. Using the highrailer came next as the recruits learned the difference of driving a truck and driving one on rails. Classes would take about two weeks before most of them would be ready to start the search for supply locations throughout the region. The most difficult task for the students was how to read the atlas and signal map together. It seemed simple at first but then the crew made the first practice trip down the tracks the lack of signs coupled with confusing numbers and markers brought home the reality of how easy it would be to wander miles of course.

CHAPTER 48

After several narrow escapes avoiding people, Asheville came into view. Now they only needed to make it to the Biltmore House. Repeatedly Lisa had told each of them "Remember the call sign will be FLASH and we must answer THUNDER." Turning onto the last leg of the trip, they rode with the windows down to hear anyone calling out to them. As Brandon turned onto the three mile, drive to the house a large group of barricades blocked the way at the gatehouse. Lisa jumped from the cab yelling FLASH to the top of her voice, THUNDER came back. Turning to the truck, she yelled "WE ARE HOME". Stepping from the cover two men moved forward with shotguns at the ready. Joey recognized her, telling his partner "It's OK I know her." She rushed forward to meet them. Hugging him saying how glad she was to be here and how she had so much to tell. He jumped into the truck with her, looking around he asked, "what happened to the others?" she sobbed as Brandon explained.

CHAPTER 49

Once again, teams found themselves spread far from the safety of the group. The power team now forty miles away working to restore the plant to operation accumulated a long list of supplies needed. The safety force found itself equally spaced from the shelter of supporting firepower. They were using boom trucks to place the concrete barriers used by construction companies for guardrails, to funnel highway lanes to one lane in addition to the barrels and cones the highway detour signs. The major highways also had fuel tankers surrounded by wreck cars providing a physical and mental deterrent to proceed. Most of the trucks either gasoline or natural gas had the triggering device used near the *House*, preventing wildlife from setting it off. They now felt this would send traffic to roads leading away from the *protected zone* as the surrounding community region was now called.

The telephone team strung miles of wire attempting to establish the first communication link between towns. More trucks of diesel and gasoline came into the holding area daily. Things were coming together at a pace quicker than first expected. However, in the back of everyone's mind was the approaching winter. The mountains are a beautiful place year-round but the winter does not forgive the unprepared. With Sunday just around the corner, Jeff reviewed his notes for the town meeting; number one on the list was winter transportation and fuel. Marshall assured him that the stock was now in good shape and the milk and eggs even in short supply was distributed to the elderly and children.

During the evening Kathy, Blanca, Tami and Marci gathered to play cards in the common area. Nearly everyone collected there to socialize, often horseshoes,

Kathy now looked like she was having a seizure, the wine long since sloshed from her glass. Tami now parted her hands showing red eyes with tears running down her face. However, it was Blanca who started Marci up again, saying, “stop it or I am going to pee myself.”

“Better you than her; if she had a short circuit no man would ever be able to **top that**.”

Things now completely out of control as the women screamed in hysteria. Wanting to get one last rise from the girls Marci now calmly picked her cards from the table asking, “Got any sixes or how about nines.” This turned out to be more than the other three could handle. Blanca was now physically on the ground as Kathy’s head found its way to the table, Tami’s face now covered again as she muttered “Hush, Hush Please”. It would be a full thirty minutes before the game could continue and then with sporadic burst of laughter.

Things at the regional meeting went well as the committees from each of the settlements discussed progress made and new problems at hand. Mark gave a report on the train recruits saying they were ready for travel anytime the committee wanted to put them in the field. Most of the members felt it would be best to send them now. As Danny stated people are preparing for the coming months so we can monitor them from a distance and plan to make contact in the spring the same for any nonessential supplies. They had also informed Steve and Mark of the steam train named *Tweestie* that ran through a tourist section of the mountains. Danny told them he was not sure if would be of value for pulling freight but it may be of some use. The two men agreed to set out at once to study the use of it. Mark told the group, steam and waterpower might be the ways of the future even if the power comes back there are still things that need fuel. As they returned to the *House* Steve asked Mark if he knew about steam operation. “No, but we got all winter to learn”.

As the teams dispatched to begin their scouting patrols, the first clouds of winter moved in. Preparing to search areas highlighted on the map the groups would be gone for an estimated three to four weeks. This would be the last major undertaking of the season. Other details completed or secured for the winter.

Standing on the roof of the giant Biltmore House Steve opened his coat allowing Kathy to snuggle inside for warmth. She told him, "It worked, didn't it?"

"Yes it did. Don't smash my little cigars; they won't be fit to smoke in a few more weeks."

When she turned to punch him in the shoulder, she spotted the first flakes of snow.

